Sophia Prokofieva

Raggity and the Cloud

Sophia Prokofieva

Raggity and the Cloud

Progress Publishers
Moscow

Translated from the Russian by *Cathleen Cook*
Illustrated by *Gennady Kalinovsky*

REQUEST TO READERS

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.
Please send all your comments to 17, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR.

С. Прокофьева
ЛОСКУТИК И ОБЛАКО
На английском языке

English translation © Progress Publishers 1982

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

П $\frac{70803\text{-}334}{014(01)\text{-}82}$ 123-82

4803010102

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	WHAT UNCLE'S GLUG HORSE WAS THINKING	5
Chapter 2	RAGGITY	7
Chapter 3	THE WHITE LION ON THE WINDOW-SILL	12
Chapter 4	BARBATOOTS	17
Chapter 5	ROSITTA THE TOAD	24
Chapter 6	THE BIRTHDAY	31
Chapter 7	TWELVE WHITE CUSTOMERS IN MELCHIOR'S SHOP	36
Chapter 8	A BIRTHDAY IN TRUE CLOUD STYLE	41
Chapter 9	THE WHITE LACE DRESS	45
Chapter 10	A REMARKABLE OCCURRENCE AT SUNSET	51
Chapter 11	AN ARMCHAIR FLIES OUT OF THE WINDOW	61
Chapter 12	THE BLACK PIGEON	72
Chapter 13	WHO ON EARTH WAS IT?	77
Chapter 14	A STRANGE GOINGS-ON AT THE WELL-ROASTED SWAN INN	85
Chapter 15	HOW TO PERSUADE THE CLOUD TO GET IN A COACH	90
Chapter 16	ALL-EARS LEARNS SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT	95
Chapter 17	VERMILION THE ARTIST MEETS ROSITTA THE TOAD	100
Chapter 18	THE ROYAL WATER-DRINKING COMPETITION	105
Chapter 19	A JOURNEY ON A PLATE OF SEMOLINA	112
Chapter 20	THE CLOUD DISCOVERS THE KING'S SECRET, WHICH IS VERY GOOD, AND LOSES ITS FREEDOM, WHICH IS VERY BAD	115
Chapter 21	HOW ROSITTA THE TOAD APPEARED ON BARBATOOTS' TABLE	124
Chapter 22	CAN THE KING EAT SEMOLINA MADE WITH WATER?	130
Chapter 23	CLOUD, WHERE ARE YOU?	134
Chapter 24	WHAT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU SLIP ON SOME LEMON PEEL	139
Chapter 25	WHAT STOPPED THE CLOUD FROM DESCRIBING ITS DREAM	142
Chapter 26	A TAR BARREL	146
Chapter 27	OLD GRANDMA THUNDERCLOUD'S LIGHTNING	153

Chapter 1

WHAT UNCLE GLUG'S OLD HORSE WAS THINKING

"Not a blade of grass..." the old horse thought.

It was pulling a cart along. On the cart was a large oaken barrel with a notice saying "Water belongs to the King". Under the notice was the royal coat-of-arms: a gold bucket and crown.

Alongside the cart walked Uncle Glug, the water-seller.

"Water! Cold, spring water!" he shouted briskly from time to time.

The cart rumbled over a bridge. There was no river under it, only dry, dusty stones.

"How can you call it a bridge, if there's no water under it," thought the horse. "It's just an empty word.

But Night Philosopher, the old owl, who flies onto my stable roof in the dark, has told me many a time that there used to be a river here with as much water as you could want. Perhaps he's gone a bit potty in his old age? Poor Night Philosopher..."

The cart was now going down a narrow alley. On either side were houses grey with dust.

"How can you call it a ditch?" thought the horse. "How can it be a ditch if it hasn't a blade of grass? It should be ashamed to call itself a ditch. And trees without leaves? They can't be trees."

"Just a mouthful, Mummy!" whimpered a thin boy.

"Uncle Glug!" a pale-faced woman called to the water-seller. "Pour my little boy a mug of water."

"Whoa, there!" called Uncle Glug, pulling in the reins. "What will you give for it?"

"A roll of lace, Uncle Glug," the woman said hastily, "fine as cobweb! You know what a good lace-maker I am."

The boy drained the mug at a single draught, while his mother put her hand under his chin to catch the drops.

The horse went past a well filled with large cobble-stones.

Sitting with their backs against the well were two guards: Lankey-Legged Ginger and Ginger the Thug. They were passing the time of day by seeing who could spit farthest.

"How can you call it a well, if you can't get a drink from it?" thought the horse. "It's just an empty word..."

"How are things?" Uncle Glug asked them. "Anybody tried...?"

"Tried what?" Lankey-Legged Ginger asked lazily, opening one eye.

"Has anybody tried to move the stones and get some water?"

"All's quiet in the daytime," Ginger the Thug gave an enormous yawn, "and at night they put a cannon by each well. Just try getting near it."

"Water! Fresh, spring water!" Uncle Glug shouted again at the top of his voice.

But no one came out of the houses. They slammed the doors and closed the shutters.

"Not a blade of grass or a leaf anywhere. Parched soil. A dead town. You can only see grass in a dream or behind the railings of the Royal Gardens. Water splashing in a barrel is enough to send you crackers!"

That is what Uncle Glug's old horse was thinking.

Chapter 2

RAGGITY

"Hey, Melchior!" shouted Uncle Glug, as his cart drew up to a small shop. Over the shop door was a crooked signboard that said: "Needles, pins, and all sharp things, everything you can wish."

The shopkeeper appeared at the doorway. You could tell at once that he sold prickly, sharp, hard things. His eyes were piercing, the lashes were like needles, and the eyebrows and moustache were like hard brushes.

"They say water's got cheaper," said the shopkeeper with a giggle.

"Not yet, it hasn't," Uncle Glug replied sadly.

"So it's two buckets for a piece of silver?" asked Melchior, even more perkily.

"One bucket for two pieces," said Uncle Glug, more sadly than ever.

Seeing that Uncle Glug was not to be cheated, Melchior stopped smiling and shouted:

"Hey, Raggity, bring the bucket!"

Out of the darkness of the shop hopped a little girl carrying a bucket.

An ordinary little girl with a freckled snub nose, green eyes and stiff ginger pigtails that stuck out in a funny way.

Only her dress was unusual.

It was made of all sorts of rags: large, small, woollen, blue, red and striped bits of cloth.

"Just a mouthful..." whispered Raggity, staring at the bucket of water.

"Whatever next!" hissed the shopkeeper.

At the moment something strange happened.

Uncle Glug's old horse, always so dejected and sleepy, suddenly tossed up its head and neighed.

Then it reared up on its hind legs, as far as the shafts permitted, and began nodding its head quickly and happily, as if greeting someone. And on top of all that it rolled its eyes in amazement, swished its tail, shook its mane and went on neighing like a silly young foal.

Uncle Glug even spilt a little water on the ground. It was the first time he had done that since he became the Royal Water-seller.

Melchior shook his head disapprovingly, took the bucket and carried it inside.

He walked carefully and slowly, like a circus artiste balancing a pole on his nose that is supporting a trayful of crystal glasses.

Raggity sighed and went up to her room in the attic.

It was a very ordinary attic. There was not a great deal of furniture there: only a pile of straw in the corner.

Raggity picked up a piece of straw from the floor and began to chew it. Suddenly she saw something at the attic window.

Actually it is hard to say whether she really saw anything or not.

But if we assume that she did, it was Uncle Glug's horse, which had managed to clamber up onto the narrow window-sill and was now sitting there.

On the other hand, we might say that she saw nothing at all, because the Uncle Glug's horse sitting on the window-sill was completely transparent. So transparent that it was almost not there at all.

"Water..." the horse moaned piteously.

Raggity was rooted to the spot. She could not move.

"I knew it..." the horse said hopelessly, swishing its tail in despair. "I knew there wouldn't be any water. Just gawking girl with a silly face."

Raggity stared in amazement as the horse's tail disappeared, and then its hind legs too.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

The horse shook its mane gently. Its middle became completely transparent.

"I knew it..." said the horse, gazing reproachfully at Raggity, "I knew that when I was dying I'd get silly questions. Questions instead of water..."

Its voice grew fainter. Raggity watched its front legs, long neck and mane disappear before her eyes.

"Water..." the horse's lips whispered and disappeared.

Raggity rushed downstairs. A hearty snoring came from the bedroom of her master and mistress. The shopkeeper snored like a bear in its den, and his wife squeaked like a gopher in its burrow.

To be quite honest, it must be said that Raggity hesitated for a moment and bit her finger hard, staring at the bucket of water. She had never dared to take even a mouthful without asking.

But a moment later, puffing and panting, she was climbing upstairs as fast as she could, with the water splashing out of the bucket and running down her bare legs.

I have no doubt whatever, dear reader, that had you been in Raggity's place with a sad, transparent horse sitting on your window-sill and asking for a drink, you would have done likewise.

Raggity pushed the door with her knee.

There was no one on the window-sill. The transparent horse had disappeared.

Never had the attic seemed so empty. Raggity gritted her teeth and clenched her fists to force back the tears. Everything had become dull and dreary. She sat down on a pile of straw, and immediately leapt up again.

She saw a single transparent and very sad horse's eye floating above the window-sill.

The eye had obviously caught sight of the bucket. It opened wide, blinked and shone with joy. Swaying slightly it floated to the bucket and plunged straight into the water.

The bucket seemed to come to life. There was a gurgling, a muttering and some very happy wheezing sounds coming from it.

A moment later a white airy head that seemed to be made of soap lather emerged from the bucket.

Raggity stared at the snub nose, the wide apart eyes, and the funny pigtails.

Two white hands grasped the rim of the bucket. A small person snorted, pulled himself up, and perched on the bucket. He pulled his torn white hem over his knees.

He reminded Raggity of someone. Someone she knew very well. But who? She could not think.

Raggity looked into the bucket.

"It's empty!" she said in surprise. "Not a drop left. Even the bottom is dry...".

"Have you ever evaporated?" the small white person asked thoughtfully.

"N-no..." Raggity whispered.

Suddenly the small white person tugged at its ear and flew gently upwards.

He did nothing to help him do this: he did not wave his hands or even wriggle the toes of his bare feet. He simply flew and that was that.

When he flew over Raggity, small drops of water fell on her face.

"Do you understand?" he asked.

"Not really," said Raggity, who did not understand at all.

"I am a cloud," the small person said simply, "an ordinary cloud."

Chapter 3

THE WHITE LION ON THE WINDOW-SILL

It grew dark. A sharp-horned crescent moon emerged from behind the tiled roof.

The Cloud sat on the window-sill, dangling its legs. The moon shone through it dimly.

"They'll only give me a thrashing..." Raggity tried to keep her spirits up, looking at the empty bucket. "How old are you?" she asked the Cloud.

"You mean how many rains I am?" the Cloud corrected her. "One million seven hundred thousand and sixty three rains."

"Rains?" said Raggity in surprise. "What's a rain?"

"Don't you know?" Now it was the Cloud's turn to be surprised. "The best thing of all, and you don't know it. It's when water comes down from the sky."

"From the sky?"

"Yes."

"Just like that? Not for money?" Raggity asked suspiciously.

"That's right."

"That never happens."

"Oh, yes it does. What a downpour Grandma arranged for me on my hundredth rain birthday! And guess what I found under my pillow when I woke up. Lightning. That was a present from Grandma. Every cloud dreams of getting lightning as a present. And my Grandma is an old Thundercloud.

"Thundercloud? Downpour?" Raggity was tired of being surprised.

"A Thundercloud is a big cloud with thunder and lightning. You wouldn't like being struck by it. You'd fly around with brown bruises all day. And a downpour is very heavy rain with bubbles in the puddles."

"Bubbles in the puddles..." Raggity blinked in delight.

"Bouncing about..." the Cloud even swallowed some saliva.

"That doesn't happen here," said Raggity sadly.

"It used to. What a river you had! A nice gentle one that ran all through the town. And the streams! Such a jolly lot. But you couldn't tell them a secret. They babbled about everything. And what a marsh you had!

So clever, always thinking about something. You could hear it sighing at night..."

"But what happened to it all?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. Not even my Grandma, Thundercloud. She just shrugs her shoulders and says: 'Can't understand it!' Just think: the river suddenly dried up for no reason at all, the streams disappeared, and the marsh vanished into thin air. Now what have you got? A desert."

"What about the Royal Gardens?"

"By the time you get there you'll evaporate. And do you think it's fun to evaporate? No, you can't tempt any self-respecting cloud into your kingdom now."

"But what about you?"

"I'm different," the Cloud came closer to Raggity. "My friend Rositta, the old toad, lives in the Royal Gardens. You should see how beautiful and clever she is!"

"Your friend..." Raggity repeated softly.

"Do you think Grandma let me fly here? Of course not? She shouted at the top of her voice: 'Don't you dare! The sky's like a frying pan there. What do you think you are—a cloud or a hamburger?' But I flew off when she wasn't looking. I so much wanted to see Rositta the Toad." Tears welled up in the Cloud's eyes. "I tried not to look at the dead trees..."

The Cloud covered its face with its hands. The tears trickled through its fingers. Tap-tap-tap, they drummed on the window-sill.

"I gave a drink to seventy-five stray dogs. Twenty-eight cats." The Cloud was crying more and more bitterly. It rocked from side to side, groaning. Tears fell even from its stiff pigtails. It had grown somehow shrivelled and pale. "I gave a drink to an old goat, four crows and a pot ... pot ... potato field... I cried all the water out of me. I didn't have a drop left..."

"That's water dripping!" came the heart-rending wail of the shopkeeper's wife below.

Only then did Raggity notice that the attic floor with its holes and cracks was swimming with water.

Two pairs of feet rushed madly up the staircase. The poor old stairs moaned and groaned each in its own key.

"It's that wretched girl! She should be sme... spa... thra..." the shopkeeper's wife spluttered angrily.

"I'll brr... frr... grr... her!" croaked Melchior.

"Fly away!" whispered Raggity desperately, backing away the door. "Fly away quickly!"

The door was flung open. The shopkeeper and his wife stopped in the narrow doorway.

The moon lit up their black mouths and hands with clutching fingers.

Eventually the shopkeeper's wife stepped back, and Melchior rushed into the attic. He took a few angry steps towards Raggity, then suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"Aah!" he shrieked in horror, squatting down on bended knee.

He was looking not at Raggity, but at something over her shoulder.

Raggity instinctively looked round.

There on the window-sill, quiet and well-mannered, oblivious of anyone, sat a magnificent white lion.

It had bent its head and was licking a heavy paw carefully with its white tongue. The night breeze ruffled its thick mane cautiously. The lion yawned lazily and the moon turned its curved teeth to silver. A small flash of lightning flew out of its mouth into the empty bucket.

The shopkeeper's wife's knobbly knees knocked together like wooden spoons.

Then she and her husband rushed to the door.

The poor staircase creaked, the door below slammed, the bolts were drawn and silence fell.

The lion at the window gave a deep sigh.

"I knew everything would end badly," it said pensively, looking out of the window at the moon. "But I didn't want this to happen. It's all because human beings are different from us clouds. For some reason you must have a roof over your heads. And if the roof has holes and you can see the stars through it, you will not rest until you have blocked up every single hole." The lion hung its head sadly. "But now you have no roof over your head. Your master and mistress will finish you off. They will begin to frazzle you, they'll make a nice hot desert for you... Can you tiptoe downstairs quietly?"

Raggity nodded.

"I'll fly out of the window," said the lion, "and wait for you round the corner."

Chapter 4

BARBATOOTS

That evening there was the most unimaginable turmoil in the Royal Kitchen, such as never before.

Kitchen-boys in white hats larger than themselves scurried about wildly. The shadows rushing along the walls from their hats looked like huge mushrooms.

In one corner five ladies of the court sobbed and blew their noses on lace handkerchiefs.

The Head Cook, a man of most nervous disposition, was pouring some sedative drops from a bottle into a small glass.

"When I get so nervous I make very nervous soups and worried compotes," he was complaining to himself.

A small kitchen-boy jogged his elbow. The medicine shot out of the glass.

The Head Cook cuffed the kitchen-boy on his enormous hat. It made a sound like a Christmas cracker.

The deafened kitchen-boy sat on the floor, blinking.

One after another servants with gold dishes came running into the kitchen. They brought terrible tidings.

"His Majesty has thrown the patties into the soup!"

"Nothing of the sort! He poured the soup into the dish of patties!"

To crown it all a snowman burst into the kitchen, if you can have a snowman putting clouds of hot steam. In fact it was a servant covered from head to foot in semolina.

"Lumpy..." he managed to blurt out through the semolina blocking up his mouth.

"Lumpy!" repeated the Head Cook, turning pale. "Now? What? It can't be!"

"It's not my fault," the servant sobbed. Large blobs of semolina dripped off his outstretched fingers and fell to the floor with a pleasant plop. "I was only serving it. His Majesty was even gracious enough to smile..."

"Smile? At you?"

"No, at the semolina. He was gracious enough to put a spoonful into his mouth and suddenly shouted 'Lumpy!' Then he began to hiccup, groan, spit, wail and stamp his feet. And then..." The snowman raised his arms and pointed to himself.

"Who made the semolina?"

The five court ladies blew their noses even more wretchedly.

"Where is Barbatoots?"

"Ninety-seven pigeons and a carriage with seven guards and a captain have been sent to fetch her."

A frightened servant ran in.

"His Majesty is demanding semolina. At once. This very moment!"

Another servant ran in.

"His Majesty is banging on the table with a spoon!"

The Head Cook leaned against the stove, then immediately spun round like a top, clutching the lobe of his ear with his burnt fingers.

"I must not be upset like this! My sauces and gravies! My patties! My mood affects them too!"

"They're coming! They're coming!" squealed a kitchen-boy, jumping up and down by the window.

Over the bridge, humped like the back of a frightened cat, rolled a carriage.

"Her favourite saucepan with the dent in the side! Her old ladle!"

A moment later the doors flew open and Barbatoots hurtled into the kitchen at the speed of a flying missile.

Immediately everyone seemed to get shorter, because their legs turned to jelly.

Barbatoots was a tall, thin, old woman. One eye was covered with a black patch, which made her look very like a pirate. In the other eye flickered a truly diabolical flame, which gave her a witch-like appearance.

The rest was no better. The long nose was crookedly saddled by a pair of broken pince-nez looped over one ear with a piece of string. Wisps of hair like grey crow feathers poked out from under her bonnet.

The old woman was wearing an ancient dressing gown and tattered slippers.

"Lazy, idle lot! 'Fraid of dirtying your hands!"

With one accord the court ladies buried their faces in their skirts. Only their shoulder-blades quivered slightly.

"Milk!" Barbatoots barked.

She tipped the jug of milk over the saucepan, generously spilling milk on the red-hot stove.

"Salt! Sugar! Semolina!" the shouts emerged from clouds of milky steam.

All this was tossed without a glance into the saucepan.

"Firewood!"

The flames roared up.

Barbatoots clambered onto a stool. Through the clouds of white steam her elbows looked like unripe bananas. Rolling up her sleeves, she began to stir the semolina with her old ladle.

The bubbles swelled and burst deafeningly, as if war had broken out in the saucepan. Soot flew up to the ceiling and dropped into the semolina like black butterflies.

Barbatoots went on wielding the ladle wildly.

Her pince-nez slipped off her nose and dived into the saucepan. It was followed by her old bonnet.

"Ready," she mumbled.

She fished the pince-nez and bonnet out of the semolina with the ladle.

Two servants reverently tipped the saucepan. White and fluffy as whipped cream, the semolina streamed onto the gold plate.

A little kitchen-boy caught a drop of it hanging on from the saucepan, licked his finger and closed his eyes blissfully.

The servant lifted the dish over his head and marched out solemnly.

"Dear Barbatoots!" said the Head Cook emotionally. "You know semolina is the King's favourite dish. And the semolina you make is divine, superb! You probably possess the secret of how to make it."

"I'm fed up..." Barbatoots muttered gloomily, looking down and wriggling the toes that poked out of a worn slipper.

"What do you mean 'fed up'?" the Head Cook exclaimed in fear and amazement.

"I'm only human... Nothing but semolina day in day out. No time off. I'm fed up."

"Dear Barbatoots, I'm getting upset again..." said the Head Cook with a tremor in his voice.

"And who promised me some assistants?"

"But..." the Head Cook pointed helplessly at the court ladies who had buried their faces in their handkerchiefs again, as if the handkerchiefs were part of their noses.

"Them?" Barbatoots yelped. "Semolina must be properly stirred, stirred and stirred again. That's the secret. But my ladle is too heavy for their dainty hands, you see. No, I swear by the last cow on earth, by the last drop of milk, I'll take the first ragged beggar-girl that crosses my path as an assistant. Only not those lazy hussies! Ugh! It's suffocating in here!"

Barbatoots leaned out of the window from her waist.

Above the Royal Gardens in an empty sky hung the yellow crescent moon.

Under the window on a path covered with fine sand sat a large toad.

She looked like an old shiny leather bag. Her skin sagged in folds on her short legs. Her warts shone like emeralds in the moonlight.

Sitting sedately round her were six young frogs, their young, tight skin shining.

The old toad looked sternly and thoughtfully at Barbatoots with an eye as round as a lantern glass. Her throat began to gurgle.

"Either I've gone potty and it's time to make rusks out of me," thought Barbatoots, "or this toad understands everything. Haven't seen such a clever face for a long time..."

The toad squeaked something and crawled off into the dew-besilked grass, followed by the small frogs.

The town clock was striking midnight when the golden coach brought Barbatoots to her sturdy wooden house with the pigeon-cot on the roof.

Barbatoots saw a hunched figure by the doorstep.

On closer inspection it turned out to be a thin girl in rags. The moon shone in the girl's staring eyes.

Raggity, for it was she, saw a terrifying one-eyed old crone. On the old woman's head was a bonnet as stiff as a cake-box. We will not find this surprising, of course, if we recall that Barbatoots' bonnet had been in the pan of semolina.

"Do you need a servant?" asked Raggity in a tiny whisper.

"You should better ask me if I need a thief," shouted Barbatoots in such a terrible voice that the candles in the windows of the neighbouring houses flickered. Barbatoots dragged Raggity out from under the porch.

"I'm not a thief!" shouted Raggity, trying to break away from Barbatoots' clutching fingers.

"Oh, aren't you!" laughed Barbatoots. "You're hanging round other people's houses at night—one!" Barbatoots bent a thin crooked finger. "Your eyes are shining—two!" Barbatoots bent a second finger. "Your stomach's rumbling with hunger—three! You want to run away—four! What more? Of course, you're a thief!"

Barbatoots took Raggity's arm and dragged her into the house. She flung her down on a bench and pushed over the heavy table loudly, so that it pinned Raggity against the wall.

Then she took a whole roasted goose out of the stove and dumped it on a plate in front of Raggity.

"Eat that!"

She poured a mug of water and banged it down on the table, spilling half of it:

"Drink that!"

A faint sigh of relief came from outside.

Barbatoots ran to the window.

She saw something white and misty pressed against the window-pane.

"Who's that there?" barked Barbatoots. "Want a touch of the stick?"

But the white, misty thing winked its goggly eyes, flew quietly away from the window and vanished into the darkness.

Chapter 5

ROSITTA THE TOAD

You are probably wondering, dear reader, how Raggity happened to be on Barbatoots' doorstep at such a late hour. And how she could have known that Barbatoots needed a servant.

Be patient, dear reader! We have dumped ahead a bit, so now we must go back a bit.

If you remember, the shopkeeper and his wife ran in terror out of the attic. Then the Cloud asked Raggity if she could tiptoe downstairs. And the Cloud itself flew out of the window.

Well, this is what happened next.

Raggity tiptoed down the stairs without a sound.

In fact she could have thundered like an elephant and danced a wild jig on each step. The shopkeeper and his wife had bolted the door fast and crawled under the bed, where they were shaking with fear so hard that the pillows and blankets thought there was an earthquake.

So Raggity left the house safely. Round the corner she saw the white lion. A moon beam was shining through the Cloud and small drops of water were dancing in its tummy.

"What about your things, your belongings?" asked the Cloud.

"Haven't got any," said Raggity guiltily.

"Good," said the Cloud approvingly. "I haven't either. I don't understand human beings. Taking bundles and trunks whenever they set out on a journey. Trudging along, their noses to the ground, not seeing anything around them... You should always travel light." The Cloud dumped up softly. "Do you know the way to the Royal Gardens?"

"Who doesn't?"

They set off.

The white lion walked slowly. Four legs seemed to be too many for him. His disobedient white paws kept getting tangled up and sometimes even knotted.

"I think I'll fly. I'm not much good at walking."

The Cloud jumped up resiliently, as if on springs, and floated alongside Raggity.

"I could drink half a fountain now," it sighed longingly. "Tell me why are you called Raggity? It's a silly name."

"Because of my dress," said Raggity quietly, not looking at the Cloud. "I collect bits of rag and sew them on to the hem and sleeves. It's not my fault that my arms and legs keep growing."

"And what do your mother and father, which all you human beings have, think about that?"

"They died long ago. I don't even remember them."

"But small people don't live alone. Who did you live with?"

"Not 'live with', but 'work for'," said Raggity. "I have always lived with strangers. When I was very little and could only crawl, a woman who made feather beds took me into her home. She stuffed mattresses and pillows with feathers. The feathers flew all over the place, and I crawled over the floor picking them up. Then when I was a bit older and learned to walk, a rich miller took me into his home. His house was full of flour dust, and I had to sweep it up from dawn till dusk. When I got older, I worked for a woman who sold fried liver. For days and days I cleaned fatty frying pans with sand. But then the woman turned me out of the house. She said I had stolen a piece of liver. Then I went to work for an innkeeper. I served his clients and carried heavy glasses of wine. But one day I dropped a glass and it broke. And then the innkeeper..."

"Oh dear!" Raggity heard behind her.

She looked round.

Tiny, wrinkled and streaming with tears, the Cloud was sitting in the dust, right in middle of the road.

"I knew it would all end very badly," it trembled in the moonlight. "Why did you tell me all that? To make me cry out my last drops of water? Was that it?"

Raggity picked up the Cloud carefully, with both hands. It was lighter than a feather. Still sniffling and weeping bitterly, the Cloud wound itself round her neck. Little streams of water trickled down Raggity's back, between her shoulder-blades.

Raggity walked slowly, often stumbling. She could not see very well. The Cloud was crawling over her eyes.

Something was beating by her left ear.

"That's its heart..." thought Raggity.

They crossed the Square of the Solitary Cow. All was quiet. Except for the clocks, in the shop of the Great Clockmaker, which were all ticking away to lull the old master to sleep.

The nearer they came to the Royal Gardens, the taller were the houses on either side of the street.

These houses had balconies, turrets and weather-vanes.

In some windows you could even see pots of flowers. These were the rich people's houses.

That was how you defined being rich in this town: by the number of flower pots in the windows.

In this town people said:

"Have you heard, my daughter is marrying a very rich man... Fortune has smiled on us! Just think, he has seven pots of flowers!"

"The Head Executioner is getting richer and richer, he's got eleven pots of roses now!"

"That crank, the old umbrella maker, has gone completely broke. Yesterday his last daisy died. Poor man, he didn't have the money to buy some water for it..."

The street ended at last. Raggity walked onto the Palace Square.

"Ugh, I've swallowed so much dust..." the Cloud moaned. "I can't take anymore. My throat's burning. Will we soon get to the Royal Gardens?"

"We've arrived. There they are," said Raggity quietly. "Look. Everything's different there. Like in a fairy tale."

Behind the heavy iron railings stood a mass of trees, silvery on one side. Flowers grew in the grass. The fountains leapt in the moonlight as if they were alive.

The Cloud slithered down Raggity's neck, slipped over the railings and, bending the jets of water, dived into the nearest fountain.

There was a gurgling sound as if a large bottle had sunk to the bottom of the fountain.

Then the Cloud hopped out of the water, looking big and fluffy, and stretched out on the dewy grass, rolling happily from side to side.

"Come here, Raggity, dear," it called in a soft voice.

"You know I can't," Raggity stepped back from the railings. "The bulldogs! The gardens are guarded by bulldogs!"

"Silly old bullies!" the Cloud sang carelessly.

Over the grass, their hind legs kicking up the dew, raced ten well-fed muscular bulldogs.

The Cloud pulled its ear and floated up onto a branch. It sat down on top of a bird. The bird sang even more sweetly, puffing out its chest, although it was in the Cloud's tummy. The Cloud took out a handkerchief, shook one corner and let it fall. The white handkerchief floated back and forth in the darkness.

In the meantime the bulldogs had poked their slavering jaws through the railings and were snarling hungrily, looking at Raggity.

"Miaow!" came a sweet little voice.

At this "miaow" the bulldogs started up, pulled out their jaws from the railings, and leapt away. Raggity saw ten stumpy tails quivering with rage.

On the grass stood a fluffy snow-white cat, arching its supple back. As befits any self-respecting cat, it had raised a paw delicately, and was brushing off a drop of dew.

The Cloud sat on the branch and watched the cat approvingly.

"Miaow!" sang the cat even more sweetly and disappeared into the shadows.

Grunting at this unheard-of insult, the bulldogs rushed after it.

"That's my hanky," sighed the Cloud. "Clever old thing! Now, come here."

Raggity squeezed cautiously through the railings.

"Don't be frightened..." the Cloud led her into the middle of the Gardens.

On a stone seat, by a broad vase full of dark water, sat an enormous toad. It was breathing heavily with age and its goggly eyes were squinting.

"Rositta the Toad!" the Cloud exclaimed, embracing her warmly.

Rositta the Toad blinked with emotion.

The Cloud hugged her and kissed her between the eyes.

Then it sat down beside her. Rositta the Toad coughed and creaked like an old tree:

"Cro... Cri... Qua... Crr... Qui... Frr... Hrr... Haa... Qua...."

"Well, I never! Goodness me!" the Cloud sighed softly, listening to Rositta. "What a king! Fancy doing that! Taking all the water. The most necessary, most beautiful, best thing of all..."

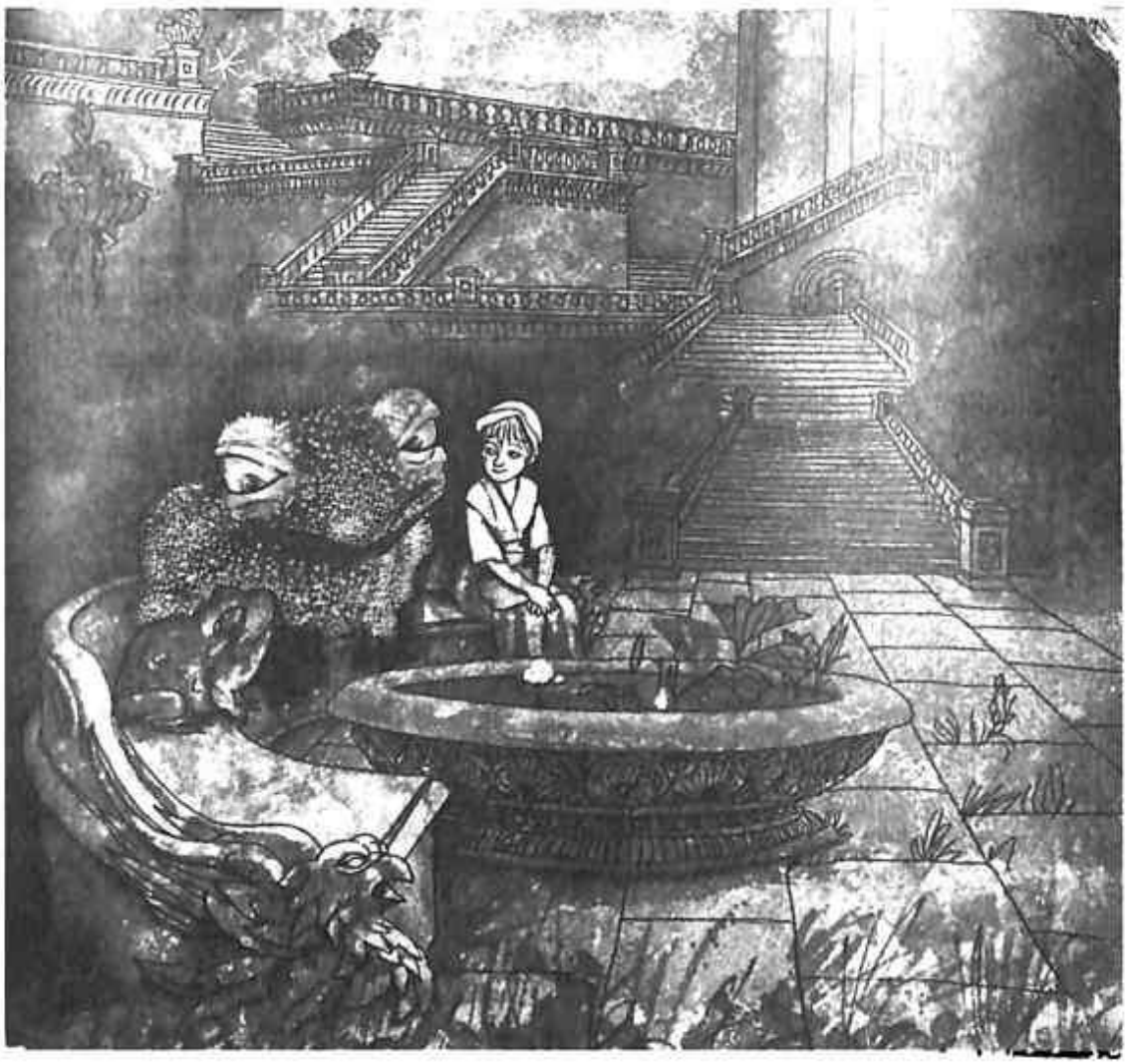
Ragitty looked at the Cloud in amazement. It had blown up its sides and become a ball. Its mouth stretched from ear to ear. Its eyes were goggling and squinting. The Cloud now looked like Rositta the Toad.

The little frogs were croaking secretly to one another in the grass. They hopped straight over the Cloud's legs.

There were tadpoles in the stone vase. Their little black eyes, the size of a pinhead, were goggling.

Rositta the Toad tapped sternly on the vase, and the tadpoles sank down like little nails.

"I knew it would all end very badly..." said the Cloud sadly. "At least she had a roof over her head. Not much



of one, but a roof all the same. What can we do now? Tell us, Rositta the Toad."

Rositta the Toad stared hard at Raggity with one goggly eye and winked. Raggity hung her head in embarrassment.

Rositta the Toad muttered something hoarsely and coughed.

"That's an idea," said the Cloud thoughtfully and turned to Raggity. "A cook here is looking for a servant. Only you must be the first to catch her eye."

Chapter 6

THE BIRTHDAY

Raggity sat propped up by six soft pillows.

Her knees were covered by three feather blankets. On her lap was a dish with sweet pies. And next to her, on a small bench, a cake with ten flickering candles.

Raggity found it hot and stuffy. She took a bite from her eighth pie without the slightest enthusiasm and began to lick her sticky fingers.

She had been living with Barbatoots for two weeks now.

Every morning Barbatoots would pinch Raggity: she would squeeze her arms and legs, pinch her sides, and poke her finger into Raggity's tummy.

"Why don't you get fat?" she wailed. "Where are those rosy cheeks, round arms, plump fingers, and even the tiniest layer of fat? I need a servant, not a rake. You'll drown my ladle in a saucepan. How can I trust my ladle to a spindle, a toothpick, a knitting needle?"

Raggity tried to eat more, but grew thinner each day.

The trouble was that the Cloud hadn't come to see her even once all this time.

"Surely it has forgotten about me and flown away for ever and I'll never see it again? It's got Rositta the Toad now, so it doesn't need me anymore."

It was these thoughts that were making her thin.

"It would be interesting to know when this skinny creature's birthday is," Barbatoots asked one day, after making Raggity eat a frying pan full of meat balls.

"I don't know," Raggity blinked, frightened.

"What do you mean 'don't know'?" Barbatoots said angrily. "When is your birthday?"

"I don't know... I don't think I've got one."

"What do you mean 'haven't got one'?" Barbatoots flew into a rage. "If you haven't got a birthday, that means you were never born. It means you don't exist. And why should I pay wages to a servant who doesn't exist. You're a crafty one, you are. No, my fine lass, you can't fool me. You're going to have a birthday, whether you like it or not. Today! This very moment!"

Barbatoots thought for a while in silence, breathing heavily.

"What would be the best way for this lazybones to spend her birthday? Of course! Lying in bed and guzzling all sorts of goodies!"

So now Raggity was in bed covered by three blankets, with a dish of sweet pies on her tummy.

Swearing like a trooper, Barbatoots had gone up to the pigeon-cot to feed the pigeons.

Raggity took a bite out of her eleventh pie sadly, then suddenly choked and coughed.

The Cloud had flown through the window.

Raggity did not even recognise it at first.

This time it looked like an enormous white owl with two large wings. A couple of white feathers fluttered to the floor, as the Cloud squeezed through the narrow window.

The Cloud settled on the headboard of the bed, cocked its head pensively to one side, blinked its round eyes.

Raggity was coughing and laughing with joy—all at once.

"I should pat you on the back, that's what you human beings do in this case, isn't it," said the Cloud worriedly. "But even if I do pat you, you won't feel it."

"Oh, it's you! Hello," gasped Raggity, getting her breath back. "How glad I am!"

The Cloud flew towards Raggity. All ten candles gave a mouselike squeak and went out.

"Nasty things!" exclaimed the Cloud angrily, flapping its wings and hopping on one foot. "I nearly boiled."

"Are you hurt?" asked Raggity anxiously.

"It's nothing. One leg will be a bit shorter, that's all," the Cloud waved a wing casually.

"You've been to see the Owl," Raggity said.

"How do you know?"

"I can see from the way you look."

"That's right," the Cloud inspected itself and sighed. "I talked to him until morning. I can't be the same thing for long. I feel like changing all the time. I can't understand people: why don't you get fed up with being the same thing all the while. It's terribly boring. If I were you I'd turn into someone different every day."

But Raggity only sighed and said nothing.

The Cloud climbed up to Raggity on the blanket.

"Why didn't you come for such a long time?" asked Raggity plaintively.

"I was busy," the Cloud said importantly. It crawled onto Raggity and whispered in her ear, spraying her with tiny cold drops. "Rositta the Toad told me a great secret! When she told me it, I made myself a hundred ears and listened with them all at once. This is what happens: each night, when the palace clock strikes

three, the streams in the Royal Gardens begin to flow in torrents, the ponds overflow their banks, and the fountains leap up to the sky. But why? Where does the water come from? Nobody knows at all. I asked the bats, and Rositta the Toad crawled under the ground to the moles. In the whole gardens you won't find a single rain worm with whom I haven't discussed the matter. But nobody knows anything about it. Not even Night Philosopher..."

There was a scraping of feet on the stairs and an angry muttering. The Cloud crawled clumsily under the bed. Barbatoots rushed into the room.

"Why haven't you eaten everything up? Why have the candles gone out? Why is the blanket wet?"

Raggity caught sight of two white feathers on the floor and the tip of a wing sticking out from under the bed, and began sweating with fear.

Barbatoots looked at her and grunted happily.

She pulled one of Raggity's pigtails and went out of the room. On the threshold she turned round and threw a silver coin at Raggity.

"Buy yourself a new dress tomorrow. I'm sick of your rags."

"Phew, boiling water, hot iron, frying pan!" muttered the Cloud, when Barbatoots had slammed the door.

The Cloud crept out from under the bed. Now it was all drawn out and flapping in the air, like a towel. It had a bonnet perched awkwardly on its head and a misted pince-nez on its nose.

"And what do you think you're doing, lying in bed?" it inquired.

"Well, actually today is my birthday," Raggity explained.

"Your birthday. That's nice," said the Cloud thoughtfully. "Although everything might still end very badly. But that doesn't mean you have to stay in bed. I

can't stand hot pillows and blankets. Come on, get up!"

"She'll murder me," said Raggity miserably.

"Hmm... Perhaps she'll go out somewhere?"

"Go out? She only goes out when they send pigeons to fetch her. The pigeons sit in the palace in cages. When the King wants some semolina, they are let out and fly to Barbatoots' pigeon-cot. That's when she goes out."

"Pigeons?" repeated the Cloud miserably. "Pigeons did you say?"

To Raggity's surprise, the Cloud slowly pulled the bonnet off its head and calmly tore it in half.

The two halves of the bonnet turned into two perfectly respectable white pigeons.

One sat on the iron bed-head and began to clean its feathers. The other even tried to peck some cake crumbs.

The Cloud undid its apron strings and tore the apron into pieces. They turned into seven more fine pigeons. A large white male pigeon puffed out its chest and started to strut after a white female pigeon. cooing loudly.

The Cloud kicked the slippers off its feet and another two pigeons flew up from the floor.

"You wouldn't mistake them for chickens, would you?" asked the Cloud.

"No, you wouldn't," Raggity agreed, delightedly.

"Off you go," the Cloud waved its long arms.

The pigeons flew out of the window, flapping their wings silently, and circled above the roof.

"Curses!" Barbatoots howled from the yard. "More semolina! He wants more semolina! I made him a whole pot only this morning. And they haven't even sent a

carriage for me! Just you wait, Head Cook, I'll prescribe you a tablet or two!"

"She's gone!" announced the Cloud a moment later. "Get out of bed, come on. Now we'll celebrate your birthday in true cloud style."

Chapter 7

TWELVE WHITE CUSTOMERS IN MELCHIOR'S SHOP

"Where's the silver coin?" Raggity asked. "I think it rolled under the bed. I heard it jingling."

Raggity crawled under the bed and found the coin. She tossed it up and caught it in her palm.

"Just think! You can buy a whole dress with this little round thing."

"Buy..." the Cloud looked at her enviously and shook its head sadly. "No cloud has ever bought anything. Human beings are always buying and selling things. But we never do. It's just not fair, you know. I'd love to be a customer just once. And I need to buy something too. I really do."

"No, I'm going to buy a dress," Raggity said in alarm.

"Greedy girl." The Cloud frowned and floated up a little way from the floor. There was an angry rumble of thunder from its stomach. "I'm not friends with greedy people."

"Alright, you take it, I didn't mean anything," Raggity said hastily.

The Cloud hopped softly round the room with big jumps, shaking like a jelly. It clapped its hands. The pince-nez slipped down to the tip of its nose.

"I'll buy some paints. A box of paints. I'll be the first cloud customer!"

"Wouldn't you like to turn into someone else?" asked Raggity mournfully. "I know you're not really Barbatoots, but it makes me feel funny all the same..."

"Turn into someone else? With the greatest of pleasure," the Cloud agreed willingly.

It pulled its ear and flew up to the ceiling. Then it split into several pieces. Eleven curly white poodles and a mongrel floated gently down from the ceiling. The mongrel had only one ear—there obviously hadn't been enough of the Cloud for the second.

"Off we go!" the mongrel barked gaily. It seemed to be the leader. "We'll go and see Melchior in his shop. I miss him so."

"Oh, no, we won't!" Raggity objected.

"I'm not friends with cowards!" the mongrel snapped offendedly, and with a dainty bound the twelve dogs flew into the air. "Whatever I say, it's always 'No! No!' from you."

Raggity dared not argue any more.

They went outside.

The eleven poodles and the mongrel trotted briskly along the street, busily sniffing the hoardings and fences. Raggity dragged along miserably in their wake.

Passers-by stopped, turned and stared after them for a long time.

The nearer they got to Melchior's shop, the worse Raggity felt.

First her head began to ache, then there was a pain in her ear. She sneezed seven times, and her lower jaw

began to chatter so much that she had to hold her cheek.

"Got toothache?" the mongrel asked sympathetically. "I got terrible toothache one day. It went on and on. I just couldn't fly. Terrible, it was. But I didn't lose my head. I just turned into a sailing boat. Sailing boats don't have teeth, as you know. And if they don't have teeth, they can't have toothache. Pity you can't change into a sailing boat..."

But Raggity wasn't listening to the mongrel's chatter.

At the end of the street Melchior's shop came into view. For some reason Raggity's leg refused to bend and she had to limp along miserably.

Then her arm got so stiff that she couldn't raise it to push the shop door open.

But there was no escape. The twelve dogs were standing next to her, breathing damply onto her bare legs.

Raggity was still hoping there would be no one in the shop. But she was unlucky. Unfortunately for her, both Melchior and his wife were there.

They were dumbfounded when Raggity came into the shop. They looked like two cats who had frozen in their tracks as they watched a silly little mouse running straight into their paws.

"A box of pai..." Raggity began, but could not even finish what she had to say.

She dropped the silver coin. It rolled round the counter until the shopkeeper's wife covered it quickly with her hand, as if it were a butterly or a grasshopper.

At that moment Melchior grabbed hold of Raggity's arm.

Had she been able to leave Melchior her arm, like a lizard leaves its tail, she would have done so willingly, even if there were no hope of growing a new one.

She pulled with all her might, but Melchior was holding her fast.

"Let me go," shouted Raggity.

"Impudent hussy!" the shopkeeper's wife hissed.

"Bring the lash, wife. It's hanging behind the door," smirked Melchior.

But before the shopkeeper's wife could take a step into the shop in trooped the twelve white dogs in slow procession.

The dark shop immediately seemed to get lighter from their white coats.

"Good day!" the mongrel nodded casually to the owners, not even glancing at Raggity.

The dogs began to examine the goods on the shelves carefully.

"How about buying a dozen cups?" asked a white poodle with a fine pompon on its tail.

"Or some scissors to trim our fur?"

"Or a hundred safety pins?"

"Oh, yes. We mustn't forget the brushes and combs! We forgot to buy them last time."

The dogs were really enjoying the role of well-to-do customers.

"But all the cups in this horrid shop are broken," the mongrel yapped scornfully, taking a high leap up.

"And the scissors are blunt!" continued the poodle with the pompon on its tail, springing up to the topmost shelf.

"The pins are bent!"

"What a hasty little shop! The combs have no teeth!"

The twelve dogs came closer and bared their white teeth.

Their teeth were as white as if the dogs brushed them morning and night without fail.

"Oh, I remember," the mongrel yapped, "we need some paints."

"Paintsss!" the other dogs growled all together, placing twenty-four white paws on the counter.

The shopkeeper's wife fainted.

Shaking all over, the shopkeeper let go of Raggity and climbed obediently onto a shelf, knocking cups, saucers, pins, combs and scissors onto his prostrate wife.

He put a box of paints on the counter. It was obvious that we would part with all his wares down to the last needle without a murmur.

It must be said that Raggity lost no time at all in leaving the shop. For some reason her head, arms and legs had stopped hurting and she had also stopped sneezing. Grabbing up the paints, Raggity sped outside like greased lightning.

Chapter 8

A BIRTHDAY IN TRUE CLOUD STYLE

"Where now?" asked Raggity.

"You'll see," yapped the mongrel.

Running past crooked houses which remained standing only because they could not decide which way to fall, the dogs led Raggity to a parched potato field.

"Let me introduce you." said the mongrel formally. "This is my friend, the former potato field."

But Raggity could only stare at the parched potato beds.

"Say hello," the mongrel whispered angrily to her. "say something... Say you're pleased to meet it..."

"Hello!" Raggity addressed the potato beds in confusion. "I'm very glad..."

All the dogs ran up to the mongrel. Their paws and heads became mixed up, and began to merge into something white and unrecognisable, which gradually turned into a head with two plaits and a snub nose, a fat stomach with a bunch of keys on the belt, that looked like Melchior's stomach, and bandy legs with knobbly knees, just like the legs of his wife.

"Now say something to upset me," the Cloud sighed. "I must get really upset now."

"Upset?" exclaimed Raggity in surprise.

"Oh, what a silly you are!" the Cloud exclaimed impatiently. "Yes, upset, of course. Then I'll cry and it will start raining."

"But I don't want to upset you!" pleaded Raggity. "And I don't need it ... your rain. I don't even know what it is like."

"Stop blabbering!" the Cloud rumbled impatiently. "Come on, upset me!"

"But I don't know how," Raggity was really confused.

"It doesn't matter how. Just say something like 'I don't love you anymore!'"

"I don't love you anymore..." Raggity repeated obediently.

"What!" The Cloud's eyebrows shot up and met on its forehead in a frown. It blinked and tears streamed from its eyes. "I knew everything would end very badly. But I kept hoping... I thought we would always be..."

The Cloud shot upwards. Raggity tried to grab it by the legs, but caught hold of a wet emptiness.

"Stop!" she shouted. "It was you who told me to say that!"

"But you shouldn't have said it!" the Cloud sobbed loudly, rising higher and higher.

"It's your fault! I didn't know you'd get so upset!"

"Yes, you did. I told you I would..." The Cloud's voice was like an echo now, and the wind carried it past Raggity.

"But it's not true. I didn't mean it!"

But the Cloud did not answer. It was stretching out and melting. Now it resembled neither Raggity nor Melchior, just a pile of white feathers from a feather mattress about to fly off in different directions.

Raggity covered her face with her hands so as not to see it. She fell down on a dry potato bed and started crying and coughing from the dust.

"Don't do that!" came a guilty voice.

Something misty, wet and also sobbing covered Raggity's head.

"Phew! That's better. When you said 'I don't love you anymore', I nearly evaporated. There are some things you must never say. That must be one of them."

The Cloud sneezed into its clever handkerchief, sighed deeply and stopped crying.

"How can I get upset now?"

The Cloud looked round thoughtfully, scratched its cheek and suddenly cried plaintively:

"Poor potato beds! Parched wretched things. Nothing will grow in you. You will never be green and beautiful..."

It bent its head as if listening to itself: something inside it splashed, gurgled and began to flow.

"It's alright. I'm upset now," said the Cloud briskly, pulled its ear, and floated upwards.

Drip, drip! A heavy drop splashed onto Raggity's nose. A second fell on her forehead.

"What's that?" she asked in astonishment.

Drip! Drip! Drip!

Silver threads hung in the air. The drops drummed on her shoulders and face. Raggity's dress was soaked. She stretched out her hands, cupping the palms, and collected some water.

"Thank you, Cloud!" she shouted, turning her face upwards. The water poured into her mouth. Raggity laughed with joy.

There was a smell of wet earth. Puddles shone between the potato beds.

Over the puddles skipped the first bubbles.

"This way, lads!"

"Water from the sky!"

"For free!"

"Hurry up!"

A dozen boys leapt over the fence. Yelling loudly, they began to hop over the puddles, catching the streams of water thirstily in their mouths.

Someone grabbed Raggity by the arm. She looked round. It was the strangest boy you have ever seen—he was black all over: his face, hair, trousers and jacket.

On his head sat a pigeon, also black all over. The boy was hopping about, but the pigeon did not fly away; it just beat its wings and gripped harder with its claws.

The boy pulled Raggity along by the arm.

And without knowing why, Raggity began yelling louder than anyone else and hopping over the puddles too.

"It's rain. Don't be afraid!" she shouted. "And those round things in the puddles are bubbles!"

The puddles were all different colours—red, blue and mauve. One of the boys had accidentally stepped on the box of paints bought in Melchior's shop. And the

bubbles hopping in the puddles were different colours too.

"That's what we call a birthday," came a voice from up above. "We call it a birthrain!"

Chapter 9

THE WHITE LACE DRESS

"Who allowed this? Who gave permission?" an angry voice shouted.

Through the raindrops Raggity made out the Captain of the King's Guards and two soldiers with lances.

They ran over the wet field. their heavy boots sinking into the mud.

"Who permitted the rain? It's high treason! Stop it! Stop it at once!" bawled the Captain of the King's Guards, gasping for breath.

"Perhaps it's you who should be stopped," a voice thundered from above.

And heavy drops began drumming on the Captain's head and shoulders. He tried to shout, but the water closed his mouth and poured into his eyes. The Captain pulled his head into his shoulders and hunched his back, covering his face with his hands.

The drenched boys ran off laughing. Raggity hopped over a fence.

"Come here! Quickly!" she shouted to the Cloud.

The Cloud slipped over the fence and flew alongside her.

"Catch that thing there! That white, round thing!" the Captain of the King's Guards shouted, snorting.

Raggity and the Cloud turned into an alley.

The Cloud had grown very small. It was breathing hoarsely. It flew in fits and starts, sinking lower and lower until it was nearly dragging along the ground.

They were spurred on from behind by the tramping of metal studded boots.

"Turn into something quickly!" shouted Raggity to the Cloud. "Anyone!"

"I can't just like that," the Cloud groaned. "I have to think first, concentrate."

The tramping grew nearer.

Raggity turned round. The Cloud was lagging about ten paces behind her. She ran back and picked it up.

Then she ran up to a fence, sat down on the ground, and began pummeling the Cloud with shaking hands.

She moulded a small head with a comb and a pair of wings close to its body. She didn't have time to do the tail.

Round the corner rushed the Captain and the soldiers.

Raggity quickly covered the Cloud with her apron.

"What are you hiding there under your apron, you ragamuffin?" shouted the Captain of the King's Guards.

One of the soldiers lifted the apron edge slightly with the end of his lance.

"It's... it's my Granny's hen..." whispered Raggity.

"Hmm..." muttered the soldier, "funny-looking hen..."

"If that's what the hen is like, what can the Granny be like, eh?" the second soldier shook his head.

"That's enough chat!" the Captain bawled at them. "Tell us, beggar-girl, have you seen anything here?"

"Seen what?" asked Raggity, blinking her eyes stupidly.

"Well, a thingummy..." the Captain tried to explain, waving his arms in the air in circles. "A thingummy, see?"

"What thingummy?" Raggity blinked more quickly.

"Well, a thingummybob..." the Captain's voice trailed away.

"What sort of thingummybob?" Raggity stared at the Captain, her mouth agape.

"What's the use of asking her!" the Captain gave up. "Thick as a post, doesn't know a thing."

The Captain and the soldiers tramped past.

Raggity took a deep breath. She looked at the Cloud. It was lying there, sad and still.

"Who are you?" the Cloud asked suspiciously, giving Raggity a befuddled look.

"What do you mean 'who'?" Raggity cried in amazement.

"Ah, I remember. You were green and branchy and you grew on the edge of the forest..." the Cloud mumbled.

"What are you talking about?" said Raggity in alarm.

"Oh, yes. You used to catch mosquitoes in the marsh..."

"Oh, no, I didn't!"

"Er... You used to say 'tick-tock' and show the time on the town tower."

"What time? What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know who you are," said the Cloud sadly. "I've forgotten everything. Well, I'm off! Cheerio."

"Wait! I gave you a drink..." Raggity reminded it timidly.

"Yes, there was something like that," the Cloud murmured thoughtfully. "A drink ... a drink... I carry water in my head, you see, and I've poured it all out.

I've cried my whole memory away. Everything I remembered. Goodbye then!"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Raggity desperately. "It's my birthday today. And you said 'rainday'."

"Yes, yes. I remember that..." The Cloud brightened up a bit.

"Then you turned into twelve dogs..."

"Yes, I remember that too..."

"And we went..."

"Stop! Be quiet! I've remembered! We went to Melchior's shop..."

"Yes!"

"And you're Raggity!"

"So that's where you are! I've got you now, my pretty one!"

Barbatoots was striding along the street, her one eye flashing with anger. She had just been to the palace and discovered that the King did not want any semolina and the Head Cook had not sent any pigeons for her.

The Cloud rolled itself into a ball, squeezed under Raggity's arm and hid there.

Barbatoots approached slowly, taking her time, which was most frightening of all. Her shadow fell on Raggity. Raggity huddled with her back against the fence.

"Where have you been? Own up," said Barbatoots in a quiet, hoarse voice.

"You were buying a dress!" whispered the Cloud, stirring slightly under her arm.

"I was buying a dress..." Raggity repeated, numb with fright.

"You're lying! If you were buying a dress, you ought to have a dress. Where is it? Show it to me!"

Barbatoots raised her clenched fists above Raggity's head.

Without thinking Raggity stretched out her hands to

ward off the blow, and suddenly there unrolled lightly in her hands a shining white lace dress.

The wind blew out the lace hem and stirred the ribbons and frills.

The lace was so fine, it seemed about to melt before your eyes.

I would wager my life that no princess in the world could refuse such a dress!

"You bought this dress for you? For a beggar-girl! A lace dress? For a grubby little gutter snipe! With ribbons? For a pauper! A white dress? The most unpractical one!" Barbatoots was so angry she could hardly speak.

She stretched out her hands to grab the dress, but someone beat her to it.

The someone was a poor little mongrel.

What a wretched creature it was!

For one thing it had only three legs and they were so small, crooked and spidery. There was no sign of a tail or ears. And it was so thin that its ribs poked through the skin.

But this did not stop the little dog from being very agile.

It leapt up high and cleverly caught the hem of the beautiful lace dress. Then it took to its heels, running as fast as its three legs would carry it.

The lace dress was dragged along in the dust.

"Cursed animal!" shouted Barbatoots and rushed after the naughty dog.

She was just about to grab the dress by the sleeve.

But barking wildly, the dog quickened its pace, leapt over a ditch, slipped under a fence and vanished.

Chapter 10

A REMARKABLE OCCURRENCE AT SUNSET

"I just won't wake up," thought Vermilion the Artist, and immediately realised that he could not get to sleep again. "Alright, so I won't get to sleep again. But no one is going to make me open my eyes."

He knew what he would see. Broken pieces of glass on the floor, smashed frames, portraits torn to shreds.

Vermilion the Artist used to live in clover.

Court dandies and rich men dallied in his studio from dawn to dusk and willingly commissioned him to paint their portraits.

But as the years went by the artist learned the innermost secrets of talent. He began to look at the world with different eyes, to see the beauty of ordinary things: a stone or a rough clay jug.

Without meaning to, he began to draw people as they really were, and not as they wished to appear.

The most remarkable thing was that the artist did not even think about it. It just happened on its own. But the cowards in his portraits were cowards, no matter how they strutted about trying to look brave.

The flatterers were flatterers.

And a cheat, even if he had succeeded in persuading

everyone that you could not find a more honest man in the whole kingdom than he, always looked a cheat in his portrait.

Needless to say, all these people were furious when they saw their portraits.

Nevertheless Vermilion the Artist had somehow managed to make ends meet.

But then the unhappy day arrived, and everything went to pieces.

Now the artist was completely ruined, and his studio wrecked.

But how did this happen, you will ask.

All that day the artist had been dogged by ill-fortune.

In the morning the King's head pastry-cook had come and asked him to paint his portrait.

In appearance the pastry-cook was a very amiable and pleasant man. He had fat soft cheeks and a sweet smile.

But as he was actually a greedy, cruel person this is exactly how he appeared in his portrait.

"It's slander, not a portrait!" the head pastry-cook screamed furiously.

He dragged the artist to a large mirror hanging on the wall.

"Now, you good-for-nothing. Look at my kind cheeks, my honest nose and nice, attractive ears! Look what a nice fellow I am! Such an amiable, pleasant chap! And you've painted me like that! It's slander, not a portrait!"

The head pastry-cook went away, slamming the door, without paying the artist a penny.

Feeling very tired, Vermilion decided to go for a walk.

He crossed the bridge of the Former River and went onto the Square of Forgotten Fountains.

Like a red-hot frying pan without a handle, the sun was sinking behind the shining roof of the palace.

The artist looked at it and hung his head.

"How sad and empty it is—a sun in a bare sky," he thought. "Clouds make a fine sunset. What a pity the people in our town have never seen a beautiful sunset. That's probably why they are so bored and nasty..."

The artist looked at the sky and gasped softly.

Everything had changed.

A Cloud was floating over the town. It was as if the sky had burst into song.

The Cloud was all lacy and delicate. The sun's rays touched it from below, flooding it with gold.

"It's like a swan or a sailing boat," thought the artist. "No, it's more like a lace dress. Yes, that's it. A dress of the finest lace. Look, another cloud has floated out from behind it. That one's like a small animal. Like a three-legged dog perhaps."

The artist looked around him. He wanted someone else to see this miracle.

But as luck would have it there was not a soul in the square.

All the rich people had already gone to bed at this hour. "Sleep more, drink less!" was their favourite motto.

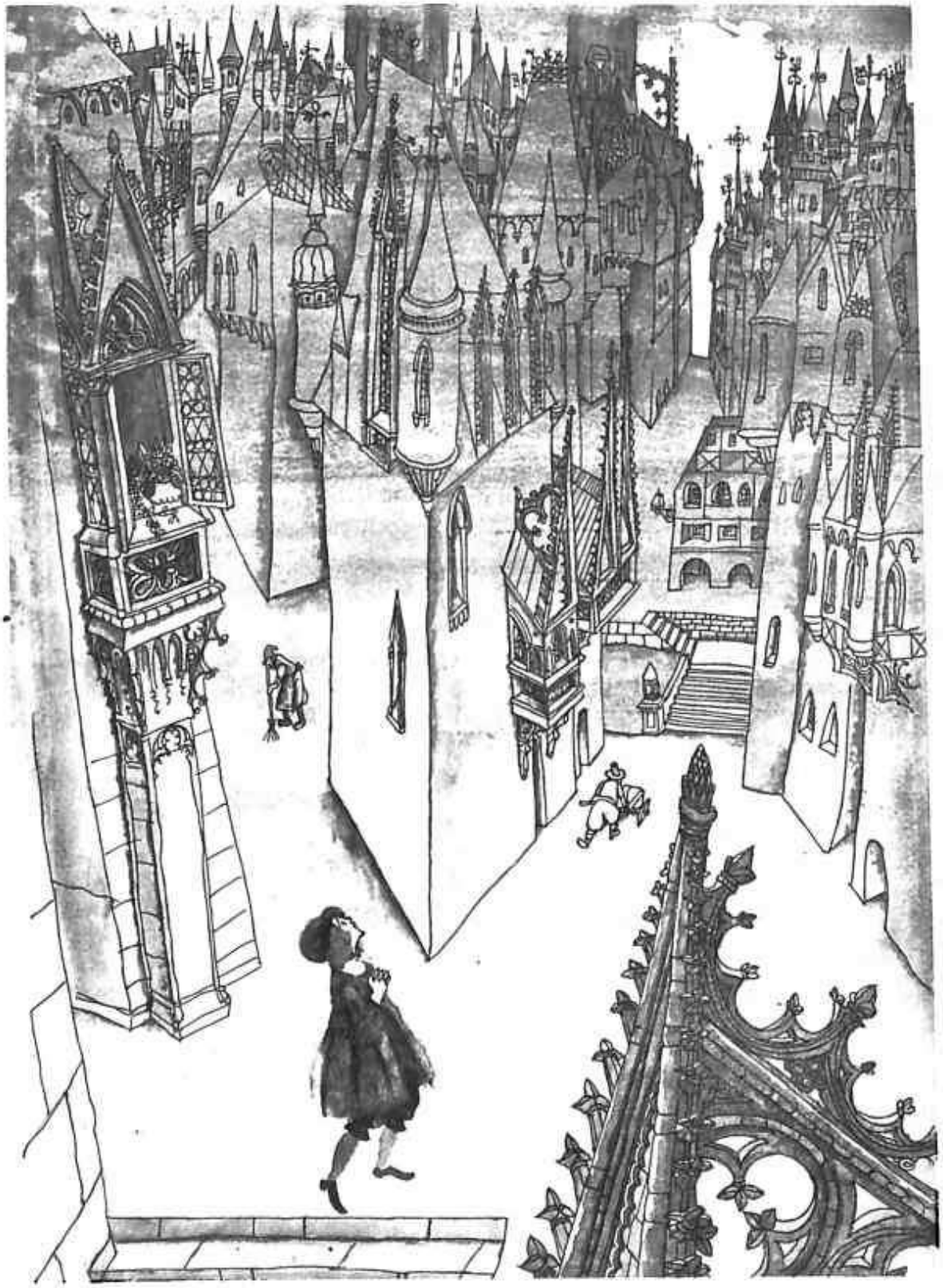
Suddenly the inhabitants of the neighbouring houses started up, slid out of beds or jumped out of their chairs. In every house something fell down or rolled over the floor.

The Head Cook dropped the bottle of tranquiliser drops on what was already a perfectly tranquil mat by his bed.

"Ding! Get up! Dong! Wake up! Clang! Out with you!" rang the big bell in the bell-tower.

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" chimed the little bells.

It is not hard to guess that all this confusion was the work of Vermilion the Artist. He had climbed up the bell-tower and started this incredible pandemonium.



A crowd soon gathered in the square.

All the streets leading to the square were dotted with night-caps and slippers.

People were asking one another:

"What's happened?"

"A fire?"

"An earthquake?"

"Hey, why are you ringing all the bells?" the Captain of the King's Guards, who in his haste had rushed out of the house carrying a pillow and was now hugging it to his stomach, asked the artist.

"Look at the sunset!" the artist cried from the bell-tower. "A cloud! A cloud! Look at that beautiful cloud! Oh, do watch! It's melting! Floating away!"

The Captain of the King's Guards asked the Head Executioner to hold his pillow for a minute, then climbed up the bell-tower and dragged the artist down by the scruff of the neck.

"I know what to do with this madman!" hissed the Head Executioner, rattling a large bunch of keys.

"So do I!" exclaimed the seller of rat poison, shaking a sack with his wares.

"So do I!" croaked the seller of hempen rope, drawing his hand around his long scraggy throat.

But the artist stood silently, deafened by the ringing of the bells, and smiled quietly.

"I've known for some time what a rogue he is! He deliberately painted me as a coward!" said the Captain of the King's Guards spitefully.

"And me as a cheat!" added the seller of medicine with an aggrieved expression because he felt out of sorts.

"To look at my portrait you would think I was a complete ignoramus!" exclaimed the governor of rich children, who actually did believe that two times two was five.

So they all went along to the artist's studio. They broke his easel and tore his pictures and drawings to pieces. "No, I just won't open my eyes," the artist thought again.

He screwed up his eyes, but for some reason kept seeing a jug. A clay jug full of water. It gave off a cold freshness.

The artist groaned and shook his head, but the wretched jug refused to disappear. He bent down. A stream of water fell and struck the bottom of the glass.

The artist sunk his teeth into the pillow.

"Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle!" the water teased him.

"I see," the artist said to himself, "I'm just very thirsty. That's all. But goodness knows when I shall be able to have a drink. I haven't a penny in my pocket."

He opened his eyes, raised himself on his elbow and stared in amazement.

And it really was an amazing sight.

The floor of the studio was completely covered with water. Scraps of drawings floated in the water, rocking gently. On one scrap was half of the gun-merchant's nose, on another the cunning eye of the court seller of galoshes, on a third the Head Executioner's ear.

The water was everywhere it could be: in cups, saucers, a spoon, a bucket, a bowl and even in the thimble that his bride-to-be, a poor seamstress, had left in the studio.

But that was not the most surprising thing.

In a deep armchair, one leg flung negligently over the other, sat he himself, Vermilion the Artist, his very self.

True he was white all over, and also somewhat transparent. But nevertheless it was him beyond a doubt. The artist recognised his hair, his face, his full blouse and even his pensive look. It was impossible to be mistaken—it was him!

"As you will understand, I have come to you on important business, not just to pass the time of day," said the white man in the armchair languidly.

"I see," the artist said to himself, but fairly loudly and audibly, "no need to panic, no need to get in a state. It's as clear as daylight: I've gone mad."

"What a bore," sighed the white person, lifting his eyes to the ceiling, "to start right at the beginning each time. To explain, narrate and interpret everything. I know he'll ask me who I am now."

"Who are you?" whispered the artist.

"I'm the Cloud. Just the Cloud," the white person said in a bored voice.

"Clear as daylight," the artist said to himself again. "Rest, vitamins, no excitement, lots of fresh air, and I'll feel much better."

"I knew it!" said the white person, with a note of irritation, as he wriggled on his chair. "It's so much easier with children. They believe everything. They understand you straightaway. Now, listen. Kindly go downstairs. You will find someone standing by the door. An ordinary little girl. I have already explained all this to her, so now let her explain it to you. You're more likely to believe her than me."

The artist rushed headlong down the stairs.

He took a remarkably long time coming up. You could hear first his voice, then Raggity's. Then there was a sound of falling and knocking as if someone was clicking a huge abacus. That was the artist tripping over a step and tumbling downstairs.

Then he again commenced his ascent from the first step.

When he entered the studio, he looked most funny. There was a large bruise on his forehead and his hair was dishevelled, but he was smiling happily.

He did not take his eyes off the Cloud and nearly fell flat on his face as he walked into a table leg.

Behind him Raggity came in timidly.

"This is a great honour for me," the artist said quietly.

"It's nothing much," the Cloud retorted, "artists ... for them the impossible is still possible..."

"Dear Cloud," said the artist. "Everything I have is yours!"

"Oh, no," the Cloud stopped him, "that's too much. I just want you to help me in one little thing. First of all, could you tell me how rich travellers dress?"

"Travellers? Rich ones..." the artist pondered. "Why, of course, shoes with buckles, a camisole of fine cloth, a feathered hat, and a cloak naturally... Yes, yes, that's how."

The Cloud jumped slightly and instantly shoes with enormous buckles appeared on its feet.

"A feathered hat..." the Cloud sighed and doffed a broad-brimmed hat with gorgeous ostrich plumes from goodness knows where.

The hem of its caftan bulged out. One after another ten shining buttons appeared on its waistcoat.

Raggity watched all this rather indifferently—she had seen funnier things than this—but the artist almost choked with amazement. All he could do was wave his hands and gasp.

"Shouldn't I add a little more respectability?" the Cloud asked thoughtfully, twirling a long moustache from under his nose. "Perhaps a fraction more tiredness? No, I only get tired from staying in one place."

The Cloud surveyed itself in the looking-glass.

"I don't think my age is quite right," it said, "a traveller who has been all over the world should not be particularly young."

Deep furrows immediately appeared on its face, and its nose became hooked.

"Fantastic..." was all the artist could say.

"Yes, not bad," agreed the Cloud. "But there is one small, but vital point, you see. No traveller is white all over."

"Well, I could pai..." the artist exclaimed excitedly, but did not finish for fear that the Cloud might take offence.

"That is precisely what I wanted to ask you to do!" smiled the white traveller. "You see, we had some paints, but they got lost."

A few minutes later the studio was a hive of industry.

Never before had Vermilion the Artist worked with such inspiration. He groaned and muttered through his teeth, imploring the Cloud not to move and to stand still just for a minute.

He would touch the Cloud with his brush, then jump back, cock his head on one side, and view his work critically from a distance.

With his best water colours he carefully painted the Cloud's cheeks, making them beautifully rosy.

Then, kneeling down, he covered the Cloud's shoes with green paint.

With the tip of his tongue between his teeth, he painted thin black bands on its stockings.

All his blue paint went on the Cloud's camisole, and all the red on the lining of its cloak.

He scraped together all the remains of gold paint and gilded the buttons on its waistcoat and the buckles on its shoes.

"I have never seen anyone look more like a rich and noble traveller!" said Vermilion, admiring his work.

The Cloud adjusted the sumptuous scarf round its neck with a contented air. On its fingers one after

another appeared rings with large diamonds shining like drops of pure water.

"The most important thing for me now is to keep a firm hold on myself," the Cloud said merrily. "You see, the water inside me circulates all the time. And if I get

upset, most unpleasant things could happen. But don't worry, I won't forget that. I shall keep a close eye on myself all the time. I don't know why some people think me careless and scatter-brained. I'm not like that at all. No, you'll see. Everything will be splendid!"

Chapter 11

AN ARMCHAIR FLIES OUT OF THE WINDOW

There were some very strange rumours about the palace of King Fountainius I.

And it was indeed a most unusual sort of palace.

I should not be wrong in saying, dear reader, that it

was the wettest palace in the world. The moistest, dampest and even, I dare say, the mouldiest.

Each morning the servants scraped the moss from the broad staircases and the mould from the marble floor, columns and even door-handles.

The King was the richest man in the kingdom, of course. It was said that his servants poured a thousand buckets of water on to the floor every morning.

And one can well believe it.

For all the floors in the palace were swimming with water. Yes, water! Real water!

So do not be surprised, dear reader, that the courtiers in the palace always went about in galoshes.

They were very special galoshes, of course. They charmed the eye with their delicate colours: pink, pale blue, violet, and mauve. And the soles were as thin as rose petals. One night's dancing at a ball, and you had a hole in the heel.

This was, of course, most profitable for the seller of court galoshes. He had made a real fortune out of galoshes. There were twelve pots of flowers on his window-sills, which, as you will appreciate, denotes considerable wealth.

The courtiers always had wet feet and suffered from chronic colds. In every corner you could hear someone sneezing loudly or suppressing a cough.

Only the King's Head Counsellor, by the name of All-Ears, didn't care and wore high black galoshes with thick soles.

All-Ears always spoke in a whisper, but he heard everything that was said in all the palace rooms. He even heard what the kitchen-boys were whispering in the kitchen.

The courtiers were horrified by the mere sight of his black galoshes. But King Fountainius I was very fond of his Head Counsellor.

The Throne Room had the most water of all.

The water lapped at the legs of the massive royal throne. Twenty strong men would not have been able to move it.

On the back of the throne was the royal coat-of-arms: a gold bucket with the inscription "Water belongs to the King".

In front of the throne was a huge marble bowl.

And just imagine: it was brimming with the purest transparent water.

Goldfish with red goggling eyes and tails like ballet skirts swam about importantly in the bowl.

The courtiers clustered round the bowl for hours, staring at it in amazement. For fish were a great rarity in this kingdom.

King Fountainius I had a truly regal appearance.

He had long ceased to grow upwards, but continued to grow outwards. His stomach nearly reached his knees, and his cheeks and chin were almost on his chest.

"Alas! Our King drinks too much!" the court physicians shook their heads worriedly, offering one another the latest cold tablets.

"As soon as I think that my subjects want a drink, I am tormented by a terrible thirst out of pity for them!" the King would sigh. "I drink so much, because I am too kind."

The King's counsellors, ministers and courtiers suffered from the same ailment. Each day they emptied so many glasses and goblets that they could hardly stagger about.

Only Head Counsellor All-Ears, the one who wore black galoshes, drank water by the thimbleful and was as thin as a rake.

That evening everyone in the palace was particularly excited.

The courtiers had forgotten about their wet feet and gathered in little groups, whispering to one another.

"And do you happen to know when he is coming to the palace?"

"At nine o'clock sharp."

"I heard he arrived on three camels."

"Huh, you heard. I saw them, just as I can see you now. Three white camels, white as snow."

"But why camels?"

"Very sensible. What's surprising about that? Camels can go for weeks without drinking."

"But why white ones?"

"His servants are wrapped from head to foot in white robes."

"Is he rich, this traveller?"

"They say he possesses wealth untold."

"He had put up at the most expensive hotel."

"I saw them myself: huge white trunks."

"But why is everything white?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

In the middle of these heated debates the court clock thought for a moment and then struck nine.

It was the cleverest and saddest clock in the world.

It had been made by the Great Clockmaker. He had worked on it for many years.

When the King saw the clock, he liked it so much that he immediately asked the Great Clockmaker to give him this trifle.

The clock was never slow or fast.

But each time before it struck, it would think for a moment.

To protect it from the damp, the clock had been covered with a large bell-glass.

At the first stroke the courtiers turned their heads towards the main doors. And on the ninth stroke the

doors swung open and into the hall came the distinguished traveller.

He bowed so low to the King, that the plumes on his hat brushed the wet floor.

His deep blue caftan of exquisitely fine cloth fitted him perfectly. The diamonds glittered on his fingers.

Everyone admired his delicate pink cheeks. No one was particularly surprised by them, of course. After all, who would you expect to have pink cheeks, if not a traveller? Travellers spend more time than anyone else in the open air.

"Which countries have you visited?" the King inquired.

"Oh, all sorts!" The traveller's voice was most pleasant. "One might say I have been all round the world. But nowhere, nowhere have I seen anything like this. These wet floors and steps... Puddles everywhere! It's quite unique. I am full of admiration!"

The traveller was obviously saying this quite sincerely, in all honesty.

The King solemnly donned his gold galoshes and conducted the guest round the palace himself.

Head Counsellor All-Ears followed them, his sharp, suspicious gaze boring into the traveller's back.

The traveller turned out to be a remarkably inquisitive person.

Gliding noiselessly over the wet floor in his green shoes, he peeped into all the corners and behind the curtains, and examined every nail in the wall, the patterns on the walls, and the door-handles.

He sighed and gasped with admiration, but gradually his expression became somewhat worried, even perplexed. Finally, almost in despair he began to look under the tables and chairs. He seemed to be searching for something. Some courtiers even thought the disting-

uished traveller might have lost one of his large diamond rings.

Finally they all returned to the main hall. The King sat down on his throne again and clapped his hands.

Servants with gold trays entered. On the trays were goblets of water.

"Water with syrup! Do try some."

"Water with lemon!"

"Water with salt, a brand new drink!

"Water with ice!"

Ice clinked in the goblets.

The courtiers downed one goblet after another and from time to time went into the Gardens to admire the moon.

Bowing low, servants with trays clustered round the distinguished traveller.

But he merely cast a bored glance at the goblets.

Gliding smoothly up to the marble bowl, he bent over and put his lips to the water.

His cheeks swelled and turned paler.

It was very quiet in the hall.

The distinguished traveller was gulping down water noisily, stopping from time to time to get his breath back. The level of the water in the marble bowl was perceptibly lower.

An elderly servant tipped his tray. One after another the goblets slid to the floor and smashed with a deafening crash.

The distinguished traveller dragged himself away from the water with obvious reluctance, shut his mouth and looked round.

It was as if the courtiers and the King himself had turned to statues while he drank. The seller of court galoshes was perched on one leg. The Head Alchemist had unfolded his handkerchief, but forgotten to blow his nose.

"Hmm..." said the distinguished traveller irritably and stroked his moustache, which was dripping with water. "I seem to have got carried away, eh?"

Who knows what would have happened if the Captain of the King's Guards had not appeared at that moment in the doorway.

He was trembling violently. His feet were sliding on the slippery floor, and he was making strenuous efforts to control them. He was a sorry sight.

His nose was twitching just like a hare's. You might even have thought that the tall hat with a cockade concealed a pair of hare's ears.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty! I am to blame... Another one has been dug up..." he said in a wretched voice.

The courtiers came to life at once.

"Surely not!"

"The ungrateful wretches!"

"Only last night they dug up the well at the end of Crooked Street!"

"And tied up the guards!"

"And today again!"

"They'll soon be digging up all the wells!"

"It's a conspiracy!"

"It's a rebellion!"

A huge iridescent soap bubble appeared on the King's lips.

One day when the King was a little boy he had swallowed a piece of soap to spite his twenty-five nurses. All twenty-five nurses were immediately thrown into prison. But this did not help.

Since then the King had only to get the slightest bit excited for the most magnificent soap bubbles to appear on his lips.

The soap swallowed by His Majesty was of the best quality, and consequently the bubbles were large,

shining and incredibly round. They reflected the marble columns, the flickering of the candles and the distorted faces of the courtiers. But this made the King even more furious.

"Fill up the well! Block it up with stones! Pour tar into it. No, molten lead!"

The soap bubbles wafted sedately round the hall. The courtiers darted to avoid them.

The distinguished traveller emitted a painful groan. But no one took any notice of him.

"Where is the well?" hissed Head Counsellor All-Ears.

"By the North Gate," replied the Captain of the King's Guards, gnashing his teeth.

"Is that where the three grey stones are?" asked the traveller with unexpected concern, taking a step forward.

The Captain of the King's Guards looked at him in surprise and nodded.

"And the tall oak tree with the large hole in it?"

The Captain nodded again, backing a little.

Then the distinguished traveller did something most peculiar. Looking terribly distressed and wringing his soft, supple hands, he rushed up to the King:

"Oh, Your Majesty! Don't do that! I beseech you, don't fill it up with stones!" He turned hastily to All-Ears. "That well is my friend! Many's the time I have spent the night in it. It was so nice and cool in there..."

Tears spurted from the distinguished traveller's eyes as if from the spout of a coffee pot.

He began to change in a most remarkable way.

His cheeks turned from a delicate pink to a deep green, while his shoes which had been green as grass now became as pink as roses. The distinguished traveller's nose went a deep blue.

The first to come to his senses was All-Ears.

"Arrest that fine fellow!" he whispered. "He's a dangerous criminal... Catch him!"

All-Ears leapt at the distinguished traveller, but the latter hopped lightly to one side.

They rushed round the hall.

The darting, abrupt jumps of the Head Counsellor reminded one of a bat in flight, whereas the traveller's movements were remarkably light and smooth.

He changed with each jump. His nose became golden and shone in all directions. But after the next jump his forehead got black and white stripes like a zebra.

At one point All-Ears nearly caught the distinguished traveller by the hem of his luttering camisole, but at that very moment the galosh fell off his right foot treacherously. While All-Ears was trying to catch it with his foot, the traveller run to the other side of the marble vase.

Here he was immediately surrounded by guards.

Kicking impatiently on his heel, to force the shoe into the insubordinate galosh, All-Ears made for the traveller:

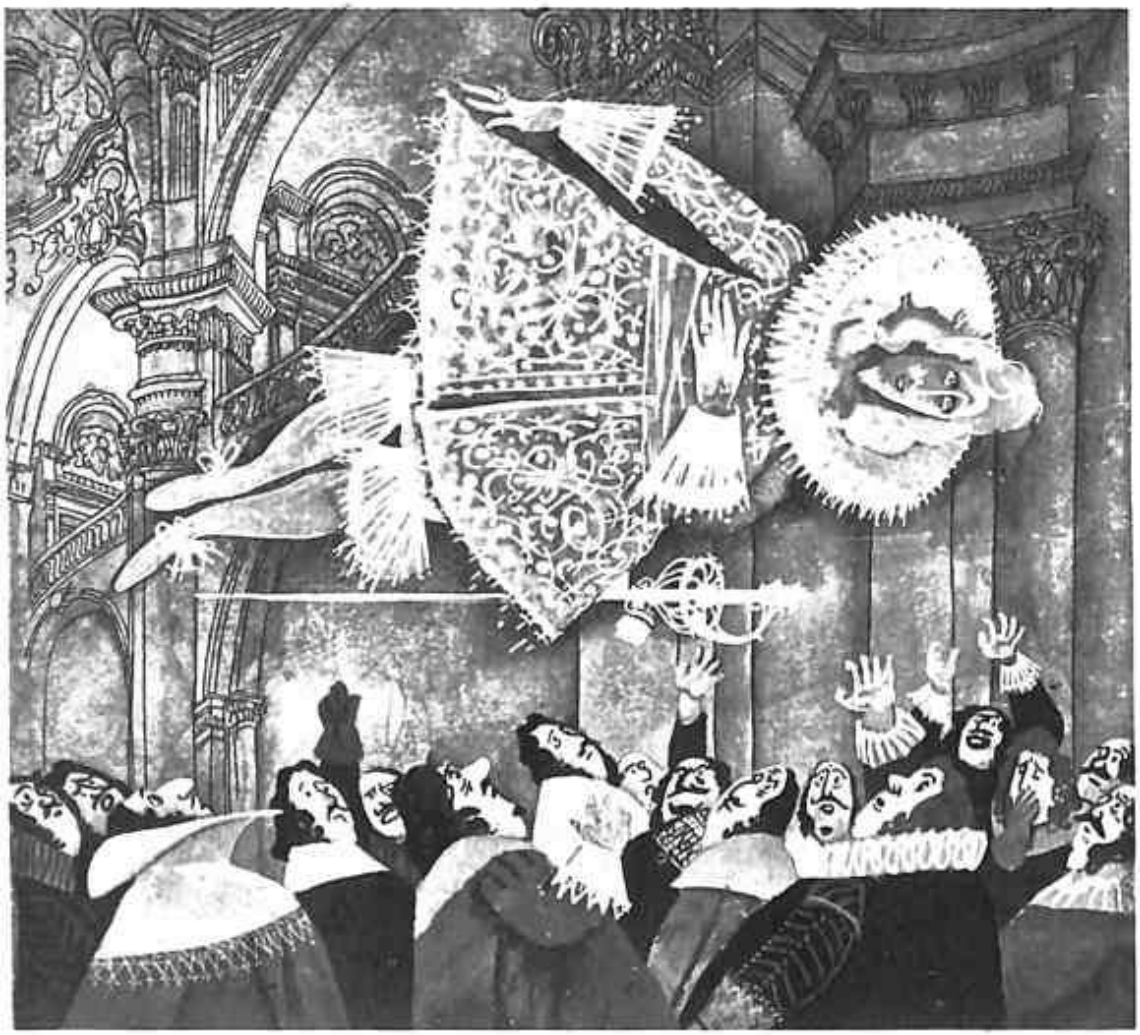
"Handcuffs! Manacles! Chains! Off to prison with him!"

But the distinguished traveller looked at him almost pityingly.

"I knew everything would end like this," he said sadly. Then he pulled his ear, gave a light jump and, after performing an incredible leap over the head of the Captain of the King's Guard, dived straight into the marble bowl.

There was a flash of ostrich plumes, which had by then turned red, blue and green, and the distinguished traveller disappeared into the water.

"Catch him! Fish the fine fellow out!" hissed All-Ears.



The guards rushed up to the marble bowl and splashed the water, groping about on the bottom.

"Got him!" shouted one of them, only to find that it was All-Ear's hand he had grabbed.

There was on incredible pandemonium. Water splashed out of the vase. The irate fish leapt high out of the water. Spray flew into the faces and eyes of the guards. The latter, unable to see, caught hold of one

another's hands in the water, and grabbed fishes' tails, thinking each time that they had caught the distinguished traveller.

Finally there was hardly any water left in the marble bowl. They all stared in dismay at a dozen or so frightened fish.

There was no distinguished traveller in the marble bowl.

He had disappeared without trace. Vanished into thin air together with his pink shoes and golden nose.

"I can't understand it!" muttered Head Counsellor All-Ears, running his hand over his wet forehead.

He sank into an armchair, which had somehow appeared behind him.

On the face of it the chair was a chair like any other one standing in the hall along the wall: the same curved gilt legs, the same back, and the same silk upholstery.

But for some reason Head Counsellor All-Ears fell through the seat and landed bump on the floor. It sounded as if all his bones had been broken.

In complete dismay he straightened his back with a creak and picked himself up from the floor.

Then the most incredible thing happened.

The armchair floated up lazily into the air. After circling once over the Head Counsellor, it waved its curved legs in farewell and flew out of an open window.

Chapter 12

THE BLACK PIGEON

"Hey, lazybones, can't you see the pigeons from the palace have come! Feed them and clean out the pigeon-cot. And I'll go and make the semolina!" Barbatoots shouted to Raggity from the yard.

By the porch black horses bent their necks flashing with violet silver and pawed the dry dust with their hoofs.

The coachman sitting in the box glanced cautiously at Barbatoots. He had a nut in his cheek and was afraid to crack it. Barbatoots climbed into the coach, muttering angrily. She slammed the door so furiously that the coachman started out of his seat. Crack! The nut broke and the coach set off.

Raggity climbed up to the pigeon-cot.

Among Barbatoots' white pigeons she suddenly noticed one that was black all over. As black as when you put your hands over your eyes on a dark night.

She caught the pigeon and stroked its back and wings. Her hand turned black too.

"That's not your pigeon! Give it back to me!" she heard.

Down in the yard stood a black boy. Black all over except for the tip of his nose.

"It flew up itself," said Raggity, offended. "I don't want it. Take it away, please."

The boy climbed up to the pigeon-cot with amazing ease.

Raggity had never seen such a thin boy. You would have thought he was made of thin supple twigs under his black worn clothes.

The pigeon immediately fluttered over to the boy and settled on his head.

But the boy went on standing and looking at Raggity.

"What's your name?" Raggity asked at last, deciding that it would be rude to say nothing.

"Sooty," the boy answered readily. "I'm a chimney sweep. I clean chimneys all over the town. Seventy a day. It's dark and smoky up them. Sometimes I think night has come to the whole world to stay. So I start talking to my pigeon. He always sits on the roof when I'm cleaning a chimney. And then it's more fun for me to sit in the long dark chimney and sweep out the soot."

"I think I've seen you before," said Raggity.

"And I've seen you. When the water was coming from the sky. What was that?"

"This is what! Take a look."

Raggity pointed to the Cloud which was peeping round the corner. The Cloud was ball-like with a mouth that stretched from ear to ear. Its short, crooked paws were pressed against its stomach.

"Who's that?" asked Sooty quietly, almost falling off the pigeon-cot.

"Don't ask it. It doesn't like that!" Raggity whispered hastily. "It's the Cloud. Just the Cloud. I'll explain to you later."

"The Cloud!" Sooty smiled in delight, which made little flecks of soot drop off his cheeks and black dust fall from his eyelashes.

The Cloud looked round and flew up to the pigeon-cot.

"Let me introduce you. This is the Cloud, and this is Sooty," said Raggity politely.

But the Cloud only croaked something inaudible. Its toadlike eyes squinted in opposite directions. It turned darker. Thunder rumbled angrily in its stomach. Without looking at anyone it settled down on the roof and moodily began to tickle the pigeons with shafts of lightning.

That evening Raggity made the Cloud a bed under her own bed as usual. She puffed up the pillows, but the Cloud just sat on the cupboard frowning darkly and tracing patterns on the dusty wallpaper with its finger.

"I don't want you to be friends with him, and that's that," the Cloud said suddenly, not looking at Raggity.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Raggity miserably. "Why not? I'm all on my own. You go off to Rositta the Toad for days on end. You don't care about me at all."

"Don't forget that I have some important business with Rositta the Toad," said the Cloud sternly.

"And just look how thin and dark you've got. I expect you don't drink regularly, just a sip here and there. You've become unsociable. Go to bed as soon as you get home. And never say a word to me about anything."

"And what do you talk to that dirty little devil about?"

"He's not a dirty little devil. Where do you think he can get the water to have a wash?"

"I expect he's told you that you're pretty, hasn't he?" the Cloud asked jealously, continuing to trace patterns on the wall.

"He hasn't told me anything of the sort."

"Well, don't you believe him. You're not pretty," said the Cloud and added suspiciously: "Has he told you he'll marry you when he grows up?"

"What are you talking about! I've only just met him."

The Cloud said nothing more and crawled gloomily under the bed.

It could not get to sleep for a long time and tossed from side to side, settling the lightning more comfortably.

Raggity heard it sighing under her bed and muttering something offendedly.

When Raggity woke up next day, the Cloud had already gone.

As soon as Barbatoots set off for the palace, Sooty appeared out of thin air, like a devil out of the ground.

Raggity waved to him. He climbed up quickly to the pigeon-cot.

"I cleaned a terribly long, crooked black chimney today," Sooty began hurriedly, "and invented a country."

"A country?" echoed Raggity in surprise.

"It was black as pitch in the chimney, so I invented it so as to make everything a bit brighter," said Sooty. "You won't laugh, will you?"

"No," Raggity shook her head.

"Perhaps there could never be such a country, but I've invented it all the same. Listen. In my country there is so much grass that all the boys and girls, even the poorest ones, can walk about on it with bare feet. There are lots of trees, too. And all of them have green leaves. You can climb them without paying anything. As much as you like."

"Wonderful..." Raggity even closed her eyes. She could imagine the country better like that.

"There's so much water that it surrounds the country on all sides."

"Let's call it the sea. The sea sounds nice."

"Yes, let's. And there are lots of clouds in the sky. One for each person. I'm going to give you this country. Let it be yours now. Would you like it?"

Raggity opened her eyes with a sigh.

"Very much."

"Very, very much!" came a spiteful voice, and a dishevelled tattered Cloud flew out from behind the pigeon-cot. "I see now. I'm not enough for you. Now you want a whole country full of clouds."

"You were eavesdropping?" exclaimed Raggity reproachfully.

"Well, what's wrong with that? We, clouds, always eavesdrop. It's not our fault that people say such stupid things below us."

"Still you ought to have said you were there and you heard everything."

"So you've got secrets from me now, have you?" said the Cloud looking daggers at Sooty. "I knew everything would end badly. My Grandma was right when she told me not to make friends with humans! No good would come of it!"

Something in the Cloud was bubbling, like water in a boiling kettle. It pulled its ear so hard that the ear came off and floated along beside it. The Cloud flew up over the pigeon-cot.

"Farewell!" it cried. "I shall never trust anyone again!"

"Come back! Come back!" shouted Raggity with all her might.

But the Cloud had stretched itself out and turned into an enormous snake. Off it flew with an offended hiss and wriggle.

Chapter 13

WHO ON EARTH WAS IT?

As you will remember, dear reader, the distinguished traveller vanished in the most mysterious fashion.

For ten minutes everyone who had witnessed these events was in complete confusion, but five minutes later a detachment of mounted guards sped out of the palace gates.

Raising an incredible amount of dust, they galloped through the streets. The dust hung over the town like a grey sack.

The guards surrounded the hotel in which the distinguished traveller had put up, but there was no traveller to be found.

The servants in white robes had also disappeared, as had the white trunks, and all that remained of the three camels tied to the post in the hotel yard were three small puddles.

True, half-blind servant swore that she had seen the camels fly up into the sky, and the white trunks tumble out of an open window one by one, rise up and disappear. But no one believed her, of course.

The King called the Privy Council.

All the King's wise men, counsellors and courtiers arrived at the palace.

There were famous alchemists in pointed caps who had spent many years trying to turn silver spoons and tin plates into gold. They smelt of sulphur and regarded one another with suspicion and ill-concealed malice.

There was even the King's Head Astronomer who had proved scientifically that the half-moon and the full moon were one and the same thing.

A plump little man was walking quickly to and fro, his hands clasped behind his back. He had tousled hair and wild-looking eyes.

He was a very famous scholar, a specialist on the shape of pancakes. He had dedicated his life to a single task: frying a square pancake in a round pan. He had made countless numbers of pancakes, whole mountains of them, but never a square one.

Yes, no doubt about it, the cream of the academic world was gathered here.

"Well, gentlemen, what are your views on the subject?" the King asked gloomily. "Who was he, this traveller?"

But even Head Counsellor All-Ears, who knew what was going on in every nook and cranny of the castle, could not answer the King's question.

"Your Majesty," announced a servant in gold livery with legs wet up to the knee. "Three men request permission to speak to Your Majesty urgently. They say they have some very important tidings for Your Majesty."

The King nodded.

"Let them in," said All-Ears.

The first to enter the hall was Melchior the shopkeeper. On seeing the sharp sabres, lances and many other sharp and pointed objects, the shopkeeper trembled with greed and fear.

"A most reliable and faithful servant of Your Majesty," Counsellor All-Ears whispered in the

King's ear. "I have heard nothing but the best about him..."

"Your Majesty..." the shopkeeper began. His whole body was shaking uncontrollably. "Twelve white dogs..."

"What!" exclaimed the King in astonishment.

"Or rather, eleven poodles, one mongrel and a lion on the window-sill!" the shopkeeper blurted out, sensing that he had said something wrong.

"A mongrel on the window-sill?" frowned the King. "Why do they send me madmen?"

"No, Your Majesty, I beg you, let him continue," said Counsellor All-Ears, pricking up his ears.

"The dogs flew round the shop and bought paints... And the lion was in the attic and flew out of the window!" Melchior finished miserably, realising that he had got confused and talked absolute rubbish.

"Flew out of the window..." All-Ears whispered. "The armchair flew away too, right out of the window! There must be some connection. Hey, give him a drink and let him go!"

The shopkeeper began twisting like a snake held by the tail. He could not take a single step. Servants took him by the arm and led him out of the hall.

The Captain of the King's Guards entered.

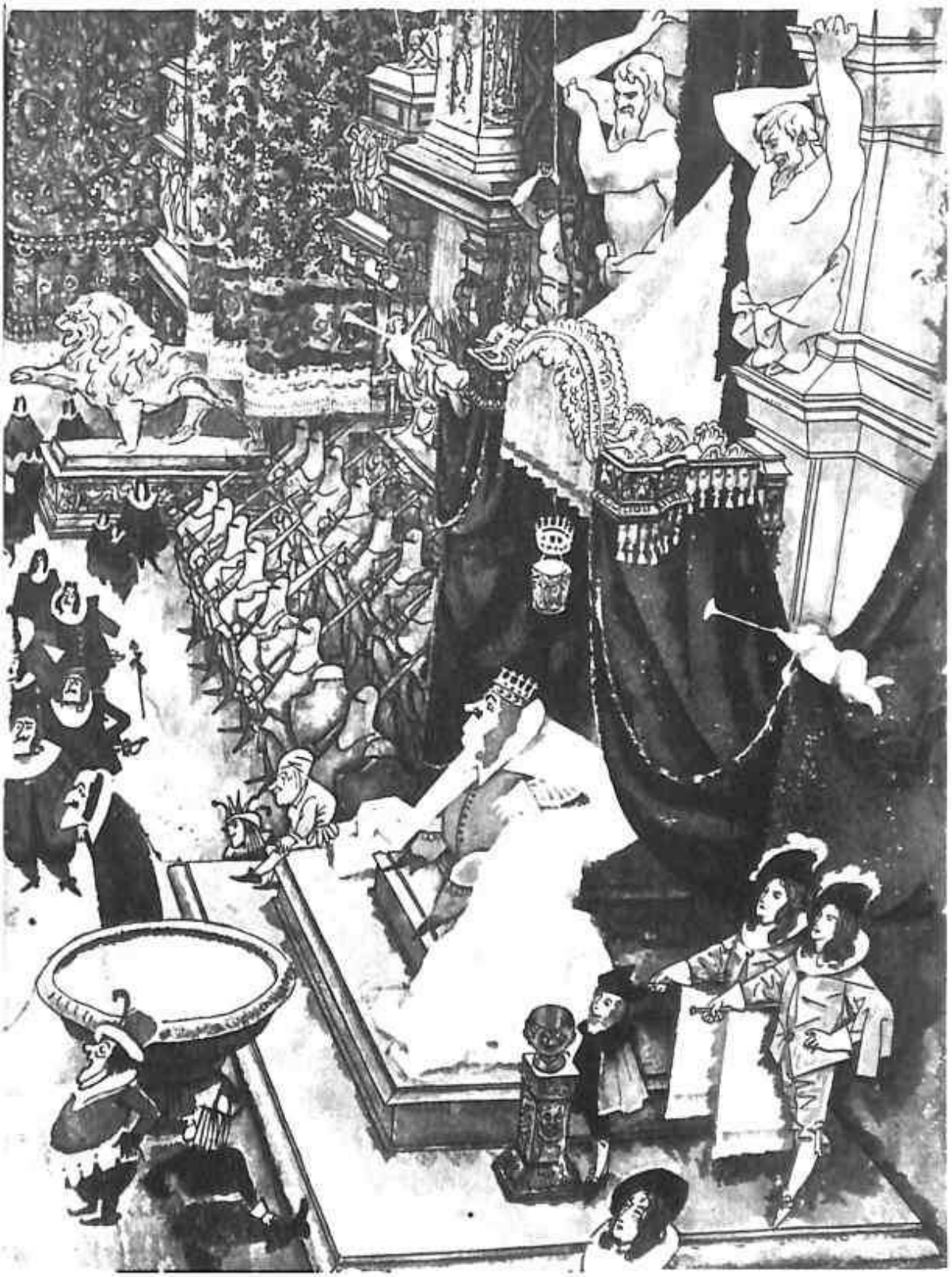
"What have you to report?" asked All-Ears.

"Water from the sky, Your Majesty!" barked the Captain.

"Water from the sky?" The King threw a worried glance at All-Ears.

"I saw it myself! It was pouring down, and they were dancing!" blurted out the Captain, so erect that he looked like a crocodile standing on its tail.

"Who was pouring? Who was dancing?" hissed All-Ears.



"The water was pouring, and the children were dancing. Right in puddles, Your Majesty! Barefoot!"

The King's face turned purple. A large soap bubble swelled on his lips, quivered, detached itself slowly and floated off down the hall.

The Captain of the King's Guards stood motionless, squinting at the soap bubble which was coming straight for him. He met the danger bravely, taking the bubble on the tip of the nose, and remained rooted to the spot, afraid of moving.

"Did you hear that?" the King swelled and foamed. "Beggar lads dancing in puddles barefoot? In my kingdom—in puddles! In my kingdom—barefoot! What impudence! Barefoot! In puddles!"

In the meantime the Captain of the King's Guards had been replaced by Uncle Glug, round as a barrel.

He made strenuous efforts to bow to the King, but without success, for a barrel cannot bend in the middle.

So he simply flopped down on the floor and, without getting up, wailed in piteous tones:

"They're not drinking any more!"

"Who isn't drinking?" The King sent off yet another bubble: a splendid, shining, pale violet one.

"The widow at the end of Beggars Street—that's one, the blind musician in Grey Alley—two, the old organ-grinder whose monkey died recently—three..." Uncle Glug listed them.

"The Devil take the old organ-grinder!" The King sent off a whole string of small blue bubbles.

"They don't buy water from me anymore—that means they don't drink anymore," Uncle Glug spread out his hands in despair.

"That means ...that means?" All-Ears mimicked him. "It means that they get their water from somewhere else."

Uncle Glug rolled out of the hall.

"His Majesty wishes to know your opinion, learned gentlemen!" hissed All-Ears.

There was an awkward silence.

"I think that the answer is to be found in the increased influence of the moon which I discovered recently," squeaked the Royal Astronomer, bowing low to the King. He thought it would make a bad impression if he did not say anything.

All-Ears just looked at him in silence, and the Royal Astronomer immediately hid behind someone's back.

"I believe," exclaimed the specialist on the shape of pancakes, his hair even more dishevelled, "I believe that these flying animals result from the fermenting of an excessive amount of yeast in the atmosphere!"

"Your Majesty, it is essential that one of these flying dogs be caught at once!" an alchemist in a high pointed cap with stars on it declared pompously. "I shall then take the flying dog to pieces with the help of silver oxide and tell you what it is."

"Ignoramus!" exclaimed another alchemist in an even higher cap. "That's unheard of. Taking flying dogs to pieces with silver oxide. It's downright ignorant! Flying dogs can be taken to pieces only with an alkali. Any schoolboy knows that!"

"No, an acid!" shouted the alchemist in the shorter hat.

"An alkali!"

"An acid!"

The alchemists began to lunge at each other like two cocks.

"A very funny thing happened recently," whispered All-Ears. Silence fell in the hall. The alchemists froze to the spot, casting venomous glances at each other. "You have probably heard about it. A half-crazed artist by the name of Vermilion climbed the bell-tower and rang the

bells. And that's not all. He shouted wildly to everyone to come and admire ...what do you think?"

"A cloud!" the wise men and courtiers sighed in unison.

"So do you not think that the answer lies here? Do you not think that there has flown into our kingdom..."

"A cloud!" shouted everyone in unison.

"Yes," whispered All-Ears. He always spoke very quietly, but everyone heard his every word.

The King sent off an extraordinarily large bubble. Quivering like a jelly, the bubble floated off, reflecting the pale faces of the courtiers.

"What a misfortune!"

"A cloud!"

"In our kingdom!"

"A cloud!"

"What a terrible thing!"

"Everything was fine, until suddenly..."

"A cloud!"

"It's a catastrophe!"

The rabbit-like Captain of the King's Guards ran in. Shaking and stammering, he reported:

"Your Majesty! On the Square of the Solitary Cow... A red man... Red all over... Weeping... Spraying wine all over the place... They surrounded him... Wanted to arrest him... But the red man ...flew up and hung from the weather vane... Your Majesty, upside down... He's hanging and weeping... Hanging and weeping..."

"That's it!" whispered All-Ears with a whistle. He turned abruptly to the King. All his bones seemed to rattle against one another.

"What?" asked the King. "I don't understand!"

"It's the Cloud!" said All-Ears very quietly.

Chapter 14

A STRANGE GOINGS ON AT THE WELL-ROASTED SWAN INN

In spite of its sad name, the Square of the Solitary Cow was the noisiest and liveliest square in the town.

The cobblers hammered, driving nails into heels, the dressmakers' irons sizzled and there was a clanging from the smithies.

The quietest person at his work was the Great Clockmaker. He made tiny springs and wheels without a sound, and only once an hour the cuckoos popped out of the clocks on the wall and cuckooed in greeting to the old master.

There were many fine craftsmen among King Fountainius I's courtiers.

They had to labour hard and long to buy a jug of water and a loaf of bread for their family.

The King gave them a pittance for their daggers with patterned handles, fine lace and embroidery, clocks that

never gained or lost time, and wonderful vases with pictures that showed through them.

The King exchanged these exquisite articles at a profit with other kings for cereals and vegetables, everything that his poor parched earth could not yield. And then sold this at triple the price to his craftsmen.

So gold poured into the King's pockets. And the coals glowed in the smithies till late at night and the weavers' looms never stopped humming. And the Great Clockmaker took the round glass out of his eye and lay down to sleep where he was, on the floor, on a hard mattress.

And then, as you already know, dear reader, all the clocks, both large and small, began to tick in time, as they had agreed, in order to lull him to sleep.

In the middle of the square some half-naked children were playing in the dust. They were drawing funny pictures on one another's dusty tummies.

Also in the square was the Well-Roasted Swan Inn.

The town's richest inhabitants would drop into the dark, cool cellar to quaff a glass of the best wine.

The innkeeper, a greedy, tight-fisted man, was extremely proud of his unusually smooth bald pate. He turned it to good profit. Each morning first thing he would rub it with a cloth until it shone like a mirror. His bald pate reflected the lights of the candles, thereby making the dark cellar brighter. Thanks to this the innkeeper used only half as many candles.

Forever lounging near the inn was the One-And-Only Beggar. The King had thrown all the other beggars into prison.

"A kingdom isn't a kingdom without beggars," King Fountainius I was fond of saying. "What sort of a king are you if you can't reduce a single one of your subjects to abject poverty? I too must have my own beggar! But only one!"

Since only the most skilled masters could survive in

this kingdom, the One-And-Only Beggar eventually became a most skilled master of his trade.

He became so adept at begging, extorting, wailing, beseeching, imploring, making his tummy rumble and exciting pity that only the very rich could chase him away from their doorstep.

The very sight of him alone was enough to give you a lump in the throat.

With tears in their eyes poor people would share their last drop of water with him.

Today the Only Beggar was not in luck.

He had hoped to get a bite at the Well-Roasted Swan, but there were only rich and miserly customers there: Uncle Glug, the Head Gaoler with his bosom pal, the Captain of the King's Guards, and the seller of court galoshes.

The Only Beggar held out a trembling hand to them, shook his rags, limped and squeaked the piece of wood that he had tied to his perfectly healthy leg.

But all he got for his pains was a kick from the Captain of the King's Guards.

Alas, this was not at all what he needed. What he needed was a piece of bread and at least a sip of water—the Only Beggar had not eaten or drunk for a whole twenty-four hours.

Everything was swimming before the poor fellow's eyes, so he was not in the least surprised to see a white man with an extraordinarily miserable air sitting on a barrel of wine at the back of the dark cellar.

The innkeeper, whose bald pate reflected two burning candles on the left and right, just behind his ears, was filling four glasses with red wine.

He placed them side by side on the counter.

The Only Beggar saw the white man lean over and gulp down a glass of red wine with a deep heavy sigh. Then the second, the third and the fourth...

The white man had grown perceptibly pinker.

Seeing that the glasses had been mysteriously emptied, the innkeeper turned his head so quickly that the light of the candles began to dance on his bald pate.

But the main thing was that in his confusion he forgot to turn off the tap.

The pink man, who had been white a few minutes ago, leaned from the barrel upside down and put his mouth right under the red stream spurting out of the tap.

"Well, I never!" muttered the astonished Only Beggar, slapping his knee.

He could not help laughing for what was probably the first time in his life.

Everyone stared at him, so they did not notice the pink man drink the wine, swell up and gradually turn a dark crimson.

"Kindly tell us who you are laughing at?" shouted the vain seller of court galoshes, throwing a large gnawed bone at the Only Beggar.

"Perhaps you dared to laugh at me?" exclaimed the Captain of the King's Guards angrily and threw the cushion he was sitting on at him.

"I'm sure you weren't laughing at me, but here you are just in case!" said the Head Gaoler, picking up the bench he was resting his feet on under the table.

He hurled it straight at the Only Beggar's head.

But the Only Beggar ducked nimbly. He was also a great master of evading blows.

"Just look at you, human beings!" came a sad, reproachful voice. "Throwing stools! A cloud would never throw a stool at the head of another cloud! Never! Do you hear?"

At this strange voice everyone turned round and stood rooted with surprise.

Hunched miserably on the top of the barrel sat a dark-red man. He raised his hand in a leisurely fashion, pulled at his ear and floated up into the air.

He flew slowly over the innkeeper and the heads of the customers seated at the table.

His face was very sad. Tears ran from his eyes.

He dropped dark spots on the dazzling white collar of the Head Gaoler, who was considered the biggest dandy in town.

The seller of court galoshes shouted loudly as a thin stream of wine spurted straight into his eye.

The Captain of the King's Guards straightened out as if he had swallowed his sabre. His nose had turned blue from a tiny flash of lightning that had struck his silver helmet.

The red man flew down to the floor. Lurching from side to side and bumping into the stools, he made for the door.

Then everyone became even more surprised. For the red man looked just like the Only Beggar.

His unkempt hair was all sticking out and a draught stirred his magnificent rags.

The red man stood on the threshold. And everyone sitting in the cellar saw that he was completely transparent and shone red like a glass of wine when you look at a flame through it.

"Come on, nobody here will understand us anyway," the red man said sadly to the Only Beggar and staggered out of the inn.

Chapter 15

HOW TO PERSUADE THE CLOUD TO GET IN A COACH

"It can't be..." whispered the Captain of the King's Guards. By then he had recovered somewhat from being struck by lightning. His nose had returned to its natural hue. "His Majesty has allowed only the One-And-Only Beggar. And now there are two of them. What shall I tell His Majesty?"

In the meantime the appearance of the red man in the Square of the Solitary Cow had caused a great din and commotion.

The wife of the rich tanner almost bumped into him. She dropped the basket of apples which she had just received in exchange for a beautifully tanned donkey skin.

The apples bounced over the road. But the children did not even rush to pick up the strange, unfamiliar fruit.

Everyone was staring at the red man.

People glanced out of windows anl straightaway rushed out into the square.

Even the Great Clockmaker got as far as the threshold and stood there, leaning against the door post.

The red man was making his way over the square, stumbling from time to time, waving his hands and singing something indistinctly. Something like this:

We're all so very, very sad.
Like cabbage leaves we can't be glad...
For people even love a frog,
A turkey, chicken or a dog.
But why does no one,
Simply no one, no one even love
A cloud?

To everyone's amazement, the red man looked around him with a vacant expression, pulled his ear and flew into the air. He perched right on the shoemaker's signboard.

The signboard was in the shape of a boot with a silver spur.

Perched on the boot, the red man became sad, rested his cheek on his palm, sobbed and said, not to anyone in particular:

"How happy I was to have found a friend here, on earth. But she spurned me for a chimney sweep... Yes, yes, a grimy little boy who had just climbed out of a chimney."

The red man's chest began to heave. He sobbed uncontrollably. Red streams ran down the wooden boot.

At this moment the owner of the Well-Roasted Swan rushed out, waving his arms.

With a shout of "Stop thief!" he rushed towards the shoemaker's shop.

Holding a trembling hand under the boot, he caught a few drops, licked them and began shaking all over.

"Cursed drunkard! My best wine! He drank a whole barrelful!"

The innkeeper jumped up and down under the boot. The heavy drops splashed on his famous bald pate.

"Human beings!" muttered the Cloud, shaking his head sadly. "He begrudges a barrel of red water. Why, any stream would give me a hundred barrels without making such a fuss about it."

"You drank my wine!" howled the innkeeper.

"Here, take it back!"

The red man wrung his rags and red drops showered over the innkeeper.

"No, you pay me!" The innkeeper jumped up as high as he could and managed to touch the boot with the tip of his finger. The boot began to sway, and the red man with it.

"Human beings! All they think of is money, not friendship," sobbed the red man. "Don't stop me giving way to my grief..."

The red man flew up higher and hung upside down from the weather vane by his feet. He covered his face with his hands and sobbed bitterly. The tears ran down his forehead and hair onto the tiles.

At that moment came the sound of a cracking whip, a swift clatter of hoofs and neighing. Into the Square of the Solitary Cow drove a heavy carriage drawn by four fine horses.

The door flew open and a thin leg in a shining black galosh appeared. Head Counsellor All-Ears hopped briskly out of the carriage.

Seeing the dumbfounded crowd, he bared his teeth angrily, but immediately without wasting a moment made for the shoemaker's shop.

The old weather vane on the shoemaker's roof turned creakingly in the light breeze. The sobbing red man hanging from it upside down turned with it.

"Is that you, venerable Cloud?" All-Ears whispered in a strangely trembling voice.

"Who else? Only you must add: wretched and deceived Cloud..." replied the little man on the weather vane piteously, blowing his nose on a red handkerchief.

"Oh, how immensely, infinitely glad I am to see you!" All-Ears waved his arms carefully as if he were afraid of startling someone. "Would you care to drive with me to the Palace?"

The innkeeper came running up to All-Ears. Clutching of his sleeve, he gabbled hastily:

"This good-for-nothing drank a whole barrel of my wine! Have him brought down at once! Have him thrown into prison!"

All-Ears pressed his hand on the innkeeper's bald pate.

"Not another word from you..." he hissed.

The innkeeper sank down like a nail beaten by a hammer.

"I am sorry for you. You've drunk that awful sour stuff. I can offer you the finest grape wines," All-Ears whispered ingratiatingly, bowing low to the Cloud.

"I d-don't want any," sobbed the Cloud and, hearing the sympathy in All-Ears' voice, he began to sob even more bitterly. "I don't want anything now..."

"Perhaps you would care to take a bath?" suggested All-Ears patiently.

"I don't want a bath... No, I knew everything would end very bably..."

"Or splash about in a fountain?" All-Ears ground his teeth quietly.

"I don't feel like splashing about..." the Cloud waved its hand hopelessly.

All-Ears' eyes flashed with anger and his fingers bent as if taking someone by the throat, but his voice only became even more sugary.

"Perhaps you would like to play cards with me? Oh, I'm sorry," All-Ears checked himself. "I had quite forgotten that clouds do not know how to play cards!"

"What!" The Cloud turned the right way up, flopped onto the roof and slid down to the very edge. There it sat, dangling its feet: one foot in a tattered red shoe, and the other bare. "I don't know how to? We, clouds, do nothing but play cards, draughts, blind man's buff, hide-and-seek, and noughts and crosses up in the sky".

"Do you really!" whispered All-Ears, pretending to be lost in admiration.

"Didn't you know? And my Grandma Old Thundercloud, my dear old Grandma, whom I disobeyed and have been cruelly punished for it, she always puts out her patience before she begins a thunder storm."

"Does she really!" whispered All-Ears again.

"I should say so..." sobbed the Cloud.

"Well, you prove it to me, dear Cloud!" All-Ears flung open the carriage door.

The Cloud climbed down clumsily from the roof. Flinging out its arms and lurching from side to side, it flew over the square and dived headfirst into the carriage.

"Off you go!" All-Ears whispered to the coachman.

He jumped in after the Cloud and slammed the door.

Chapter 16

ALL-EARS LEARNS SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT

As soon as the carriage moved off, the drunken Cloud collapsed on All-Ears' chest and burst out crying.

All-Ears sat staring glassily over the Cloud's tousled head. His camisole and shirt were covered with wine.

But he went on patiently sitting still, afraid of moving and startling the Cloud.

"Did you fly into our kingdom a long time ago?" enquired All-Ears cautiously, squinting at the Cloud's unkempt head.

"Two months. I stayed here because of her... Because of the girl... And she..." the Cloud began sobbing.

"What's her name?" All-Ears whispered, bending his ear towards the Cloud.

"You alone understand me, my friend, you alone!" the Cloud sobbed, twining his winey arms round All-Ears' neck.

"Ah, dear Cloud! You should have flown to me straightaway", whispered All-Ears in mild reproach. "I would have arranged things splendidly for you, with all the comfort you could want..." All-Ears' face looked sinister, but the Cloud did not notice it. "You flew here alone, such a delicate and defenceless creature. You might have been hurt!"

"She has dealt me a mortal blow! She and that boy!" exclaimed the Cloud, and the tears streamed from its eyes. Its arms were still round All-Ears' neck. Its handkerchief slipped out of its holey pocket, flew up and wiped the tears running down the Cloud's cheek.

"You might have been killed!" All-Ears shook his head worriedly.

"I can't be killed... She seemed so lonely to me..."

"Can't anything be done to you?" asked All-Ears softly, barely able to conceal his excitement.

"Yes, only nobody knows what it is. I can be... And I was lonely too. Nobody in the sky understood me."

"You didn't finish telling me. What can you be?" All-Ears' voice trembled almost imperceptibly.

"Strangled?"

"No, I can't be strangled. I can only be... You don't know how little all the clouds care about anyone. They just fly where the wind blows."

"Perhaps you can be stoned? Chained up? Put behind bars? Knifed?"

"I was so happy under her bed." The Cloud covered its eyes with its hand, indulging in memories. "Before I went to sleep she used to say 'goodnight' to me. Nobody's ever said that to me before."

"Buried in sand? Or in the ground? I only ask because I am terribly worried about you!"

"She used to say to me: 'You don't look well. You've got thin. You should drink more?' Oh, dear!" the Cloud groaned.

All the cushions in the carriage were soaked with wine. The wine fumes made All-Ears' head go round.

Even the coachman began to wobble on his seat, and the horses started stumbling.

"Perhaps you could be salted in a barrel of cucumbers? Or loaded into a cannon and fired?" All-Ears went on desperately. "How worried I am about you! How worried!"

Had the Cloud raised its head, it would have seen the impatience and hatred gleaming in All-Ears' narrow eyes.

"Oh, you are a bore!" The Cloud could not restrain itself any longer. "Listen: I can be frozen! See? Frozen! And that would be the end of me. I wouldn't be able to fly. I would become an ordinary piece of ice, and that's that. But nobody knows. So stop worrying and let me lament my sad fate..."

"Frozen..." whispered All-Ears. He leant back on the damp, heavy cushions and closed his eyes for a minute. "So that's it...".

The carriage was doing funny zigzags along the streets.

The coachmen in the box was singing something, although he had neither a voice nor an ear for music. The horses were neighing ecstatically.

"Dear Cloud," said All-Ears, trying to settle down comfortably amid the wet cushions. "I will help you get your revenge. Disclose to me the names of the boy and girl. They shall go head-over-heels into prison, or further if you like, right to the gallows."

"What? What did you say?" The Cloud drew away from All-Ears' chest and stared at him. "I may be only a drunken Cloud, but ... send a little girl and boy to the gallows? Just because they were friends?" The Cloud clutched its forehead and shook its unkempt head. "You scoundrel! How dare you say such a thing to me!" The Cloud flew up as high as the confined carriage permitted. "I won't go any further with you! Stop the carriage and let me out."

"Oh, no," whispered All-Ears maliciously. "I've got you now, my precious!"

"Where are you taking me?" The Cloud bumped the glass.

"To a nice icy little room," whispered All-Ears exultantly, striking terror into the Cloud. "I'll put you to sleep in an icy bed. Your teeth will chatter a bit with the cold, but never mind."

"What for? What have I done wrong?"

The Cloud beat against the windows and sides of the carriage.

"You did something good and now you must pay for it. We don't like that in our kingdom. And as for your friends, I'll see to them, don't you worry."

"No, don't touch them!" The Cloud wrung its hands imploringly. "They're not guilty of anything."

"You can beg as much as you like," All-Ears smirked spitefully, "yours words are no more to me than bees buzzing round my ears..."

The carriage was shaken by a heavy peal of thunder

that made the windows rattle, and the horses take a mighty leap and speed off like arrows.

At that very moment the Cloud split into a thousand small pieces.

The carriage was filled with a loud humming—the Cloud had turned into a thousand bees.

Head Counsellor All-Ears waved his arms in terror. But, as you know, this is the worst way of getting rid of bees.

The bees dived at him from all sides.

Five bees stung his nose, seven his forehead, goodness knows how many his cheeks and neck.

The bees had a very painful sting.

What is more, they were not exactly ordinary bee stings. These stings made All-Ears jump up and down on the cushions. He began shaking from head to foot.

For each bee had a tiny flash of lightning instead of a sting—the Cloud had split up its lightning into a thousand pieces.

Buzzing malevolently, the bees circled round All-Ears and stung taking particular pleasure in stinging him on his famous ears.

All-Ears thrashed about, screaming, hopping, clutching first his nose, then his ear...

Finally he could bear it no longer and flung open the door of the carriage.

The bees swarmed out at a leisurely pace, humming solemnly.

All-Ears gnashed his teeth so furiously, that the coachman drew in the reins and turned round, thinking there had been an accident.

Meanwhile the bees swarmed calmly over the roofs.

"Turn round! After him! Quick!" whispered All-Ears.

But the street was too narrow and the carriage became stuck, unable to move backwards or forwards.

All-Ears bit his nails, fingers and hands frantically watching the Cloud fly away.

Now it was no longer a swarm of bees. The bees were merging into something long and faintly familiar.

All-Ears recognised himself. His own protuberant ears and legs. The legs were thin and bony, in large pale-pink galoshes.

Chapter 17

VERMILTON THE ARTIST MEETS ROSITTA THE TOAD

The Cloud arrived home all meek and mild. It went under the bed quietly without any tantrums.

"It's always like that: it makes a terrible commotion, then feels ashamed of itself. Realises it's been naughty," thought Raggity, remembering how angry the Cloud had been after overhearing her conversation with Sooty.

But Raggity did not know that the Cloud was troubled by something quite different.

"I can't make out who you are like today," she said, hanging from the bed and picking up the edge of the blanket. "Where did you get those funny ears from? I don't know who you saw today, but I can tell you straight—it was someone very wicked and nasty."

The Cloud did not answer. It turned its back on Raggity and drew its knees up to its chin.

"Has anything happened?" asked Raggity worriedly. "Are you feeling alright? You look very pink somehow."

"No, no, go to sleep," the Cloud sighed.

Raggity was just going to sleep when a bat flew in through the open window. It began to fly round the room, drawing sharp triangles in the air.

It was searching for something to hang upside down from, but found nothing suitable and suddenly caught hold of Raggity's hair.

Raggity prised open the cold claws carefully, so as not to hurt the bat, and pulled it off her head.

The bat flew onto the cupboard, squeaking indignantly—it had evidently preferred hanging on to Raggity's hair.

The Cloud crawled reluctantly out from under the bed.

"Pee-pee-pee-tee-tee-tee! squeaked the bat shilly, like a small drawer being opened and closed. "Tee-pee-pee-pee! Pee-tee-tee-tee!"

The Cloud noiselessly stamped its foot in the large galosh in annoyance.

"Well, I never! She's a detective, not a toad. How did she find out?"

The bat shook its head, flew off the cupboard, drew another triangle in the air and disappeared out of the window.

"Find out what?" said Raggity in alarm. "What are you talking about?"

"Keep pestering me like a bee round a honey pot!" snapped the Cloud. "Get ready, we're going to see Rositta the Toad."

Raggity and the Cloud tiptoed past Barbatoots' room.

Barbatoots was groaning and screaming in her sleep: "The volcano's erupting! Look out! Run! There's semolina pouring out of it! Piles of semolina... It will flood the whole town, the whole land..."

Semolina gave Barbatoots no peace, even in her sleep.

"You know what," said the Cloud when they were

outside, "let's go and get Vermilion. He asked me to introduce him to Rositta the Toad a long time ago." The Cloud sighed and added something quite incomprehensible: "Perhaps if he's there she won't go on at me so... She'll be too embarrassed."

Raggity did not ask any questions. She saw that the Cloud was very upset about something.

They went to Vermilion's house.

The Cloud stretched out an arm.

The arm began to grow longer and longer until it could easily reach Vermilion's window though he lived on the top floor, under the roof.

A sleepy Vermilion looked out of the window, saw Raggity and the Cloud and nodded happily.

A minute later he had joined them.

They set off along the empty night streets to the Royal Gardens.

The dust kicked up by their feet rose in columns as if it wanted to reach the moon.

The bulldogs guarding the Gardens caught sight of the Cloud from a long way off.

They hung their heads low, and their hind legs and tails danced a dance of complete submission.

Then they went away, looking in the opposite direction as if they had seen or heard nothing. There was no need even for the clever handkerchief.

As always Rositta the Toad was sitting on the stone bench breathing heavily from old age.

"What a marvellous toad!" exclaimed Vermilion the Artist. "What wisdom and restraint. I really must paint her portrait. Yes, yes! I would paint her in profile lit by the moon. But unfortunately that's impossible. I have no money to buy paints..."

On seeing the Cloud, Rositta the Toad shook her head angrily and even spat out a mosquito.

Overjoyed at its unexpected salvation the mosquito burst into tremulous song and disappeared.

The Cloud stood, hanging its head quiltily and twisting its handkerchief.

By this time Raggity had learnt a little toad language. At least she could make out odd words.

Rositta the Toad croaked, squeaked, wheezed and banged on the stone bench with her wrinkled crooked leg:

"Hee... Cree... What... cro... Cro... Tcch... Careless... Puff... Scrr... Ughh... Getting drunk... Hee... Shame... Hee... Hee... Hee!"

Rositta the Toad coughed so heavily that she could not continue.

"So what..." mumbled the Cloud. "The only time it's ever happened. Alright, so I drank some red water. I can't even remember what happened to me afterwards..."

But Rositta the Toad would not even look at the Cloud.

Very majestically, like an old queen, she indicated with one leg to Vermilion the Artist that he should take a seat beside her.

Vermilion respectfully sat down on the edge of the bench.

"Cri... Cra... Hee... Hee?" Rositta the Toad croaked politely to Vermilion.

Vermilion looked enquiringly at the Cloud.

"She's asking how you are," the Cloud explained reluctantly.

It turned away offendedly, staring into the darkness.

It looked as if it were about to fly away to the ends of the earth. It had already begun to stretch out. This was a sure sign that it would take off.

The Cloud was just about to pull its ear.

"Not too good, not too good at all, dear Rositta the Toad," said the artist, thoughtfully rubbing his knees. "I haven't a penny. I make a bit of money by going to the palace and painting notices. Some of them are very

funny. Yesterday, for example, I painted one..." Vermilion wrinkled his brow, trying to remember. "Oh, yes! A very funny notice. It will be stuck up tomorrow all over the town: 'A royal water-drinking competition will be held on Monday at three o'clock in the Palace. The one who drinks the most water will receive five purses of gold'."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the Cloud in quiet excitement. Its eyes were popping. "The one who drinks the most water! That's right up my street!"

"I won't let you, don't you dare," Raggity shook her head. "They'll catch you!"

"No, they won't. I'll be ever so careful!"

"I know how careful you are. They'll catch you and pop you into a saucepan—and on to the stove." Raggity screwed up her eyes in terror.

"So I'll evaporate and turn into myself again."

"They'll think of something else..."

"Don't be silly!"

"No, no, no!" Raggity repeated.

"Don't you see that they can't do anything to me, you silly girl!" The Cloud was jigging up and down impatiently, drawing in shining drops of dew. "I can't be fried, or killed, or shot like you human beings." The Cloud glanced at Raggity who looked as though she would never stop frowning. "All right, listen. The only way they can harm me is by freezing me. But they will never know that, see? I have never told anyone about it. You're the first."

Rositta the Toad turned one eye thoughtfull on the Cloud. The eye was round and transparent. A little green light seemed to be burning deep down in it.

"Just think," the Cloud pleaded with Rositta the Toad, noticing her hesitation. "It's so long since I've been able to get into the Palace. They've closed all the windows, pasted over the cracks and blocked up the keyholes with wax. Why do you think I'm scatter-

brained? You don't even know what my plan is. They'll never find out that I am me."

Rositta the Toad slowly nodded her square head.

"Darling Rositta!" exclaimed the Cloud and rushed to embrace her.

It flew high into the air with joy and turned head over heels in the moonlight.

A bat darted through it squeaking.

Chapter 18

THE ROYAL WATER-DRINKING COMPETITION

The notice painted by Vermilion the Artist hung on the park railings. The wind had bent one of the corners.

The heavy trellised gates were open wide in welcome.

A crowd stood by the gates. From time to time someone would break away from the crowd and walk timidly through the gates.

But only a few. Everyone thought you couldn't expect anything good from the King and it was better not to get mixed up in all this.

Nevertheless a fair number turned up in the end. There were also poor who had nothing to lose. They were simply hoping to drink their fill of water for once.

There were rich people as well, of course. Water was no rarity to them. They were used to drinking a lot and hoped to win the five purses of gold.

By the entrance to the main hall all the competitors were met by two hefty guards: Lankey-Legged Ginger and Ginger the Thug in enormous ugly galoshes. They were pinching everyone who came through the door.

Lankey-Legged Ginger would slap the person on the shoulder. Then Ginger the Thug would grab the competitor by the arms and hold him while Lankey-Legged Ginger bent over and pinched his knees and shoes.

If anyone had looked behind the heavy curtains by the door, they would have found Head Counsellor All-Ears there.

His eye glued to the gap between the curtains, and licking his lips with impatience, he avidly surveyed each person who entered.

"I've worked it all out..." he whispered under his breath. "The Cloud is bound to come. It couldn't stay away, I know. No matter who it pretends to be, we will discover it at once by pinching it. But where is it? Perhars that's it. No, that's the Head Gaoler. And that's Uncle Glug. They say he sells diluted water. But what does he dilute it with? Air? And that's not the Cloud. Nor is that... Look who's turned up now: the seller of court galoshes. And even the umbrella maker has deigned to come! But there's no Cloud. That's not it. Nor is that. And nor is that. A funny old man with a grey beard, in a greasy green jacket. Ginger the Thug has slapped him on the shoulder. And he's flopped down, poor devil. And there's the One-And-Only Beggar. He's come to have a drink. Lankey-Legged Ginger nearly knocked him over. No, that's not the Cloud, that's real flesh and blood. And that's not it. And there's no one else. Surely ... surely I wasn't wrong and the Cloud hasn't come after all?"

In the midst of these anxious thoughts the palace clock thought hard for a moment, then struck three

times. Many people noticed that this time the clock seemed to think for longer than usual.

Twelve trumpeters raised their gilded trumpets and blew a fanfare. Or rather, only eleven blew the fanfare, for out of the twelfth trumpet spurted a jet of water.

The King, who was sitting on the throne, yawned loudly and tapped his foot in a gold galosh.

The competitors were allowed to enter the hall.

The rich men stood near to the King, while the poor huddled against the walls. The old man with the grey beard modestly retired to a corner.

All-Ears sighed and came out from behind the curtain.

"Well, let us commence!" He whispered. "He who drinks plenty is a true friend of the King! Let us commence our royal competition!"

Servants entered carrying trays with glasses of water.

Everybody snatched a glass greedily.

As soon as anyone put an empty glass on a tray, a servant immediately handed him a large wooden ring with a respectful bow.

The poor people who were not used to drinking barely managed to drain five glasses.

The One-And-Only Beggar could hardly drink three. He stared sadly at the fourth and could not make himself drink it up.

The tanner had tanned the skin on his stomach so well that his stomach could stretch to an incredible size.

He had already drunk thirty-five glasses and was gazing round triumphantly. There were wooden rings on his arms and even on his neck.

"My dear gold coins," he thought. "Cheep, cheep, cheep, my little gold chicks! I'll make you a lovely hen-house in my moneybox!"

The seller of court galoshes had drunk ten glasses, and emptied the eleventh surreptitiously on the floor.

But All-Ears noticed, and the seller of court galoshes did not get an eleventh ring.

The Head Gaoler was cajoling himself:

"Come along, old chap! Out of self-esteem, drink another glass! Drink this one to your Mum! And this one to your Dad! What, you can't manage any more? And I thought you were an egoist and would drink more than anyone out of self-esteem!"

The ruined umbrella seller, a long, bony man who looked like a closed umbrella himself, was holding a glass of water in his hand and could not take a swallow. He was looking at it with tear-filled eyes and thinking about his dead daisy.

Around him the glasses rang and the wooden rings clacked.

The tanner had now drunk seventy-two glasses, and his camisole was splitting at the seams.

Many people were already lying on the floor stomachs up.

Uncle Glug had water streaming from his nose and mouth like a drowned man.

"What shall we do, Your Excellency? There are only a few rings left," the head servant whispered in All-Ears' ear.

"There must be," whispered All-Ears. "We had five thousand rings."

The servant pointed silently to a corner.

"What is it?" whispered All-Ears, turning pale.

All those who could still turn their heads looked in the direction in which the Head Cousellor was staring.

The tanner dropped his seventy-third glass.

The humble old man with the white beard, sitting in a corner, was completely inundated with wooden rings. In fact, you could not even see him. In his place was a huge pile of rings under which something moved from time to time and from which an indistinct muttering

could be heard. A hand managed to push out of the pile and take yet another glass.

The rings flew in all directions and out popped the old man's head and beard. The beard was all wild and dishevelled.

"Another couple of glasses, and that's the lot," the old man said to himself sternly, stroking his beard.

All-Ears rubbed his eyes.

"The old man's beard seems to be growing before my very eyes..." he thought. "I must be going mad..."

The tanner pounded his stomach with his fist in a rage. The water in his stomach plashed dully.

Meanwhile the old man, muttering something deep into his beard, downed another five glasses and said to himself sternly:

"That's enough! This is the last one, honest it is!"

He did not even take the six rings proffered by the servant.

The victory was complete.

Stepping over the prostrate competitors, All-Ears made his way to the old man.

"Allow me to shake you by the hand!" he whispered, his piercing gaze intent on the old man's face.

The old man smiled and gave All-Ears a firm handshake. All-Ears turned pale, staggered, and his nose became as white as a sheet.

To the sound of trumpets the old man was solemnly presented with five purses of gold. He calmly stuffed them into the pockets of his old green jacket.

The servants took the prostrate drinkers by the arms and dragged them out of the hall. Their heels kicked up little waves on the water-covered floor.

The old man fought his way through the pile of rings and made for the door. He tucked the end of his beard into his pocket.

By the door Lankey-Legged Ginger burst out laughing and slapped his sides:

"Ha-ha-ha! Hey, Thug! Seen the old fellow's beard? It's a real laugh. When he turned his head, it stayed where it was, couldn't keep up with him. And I'll be blowed if the end of the beard didn't creep into the glass and empty it quick as a flash!"

"What's that!" whispered All-Ears, who had appeared from somewhere. As always he heard everything that

was being said in all corners of the palace. "The beard drank the water itself!"

All-Ears clapped his hands.

Alarm bells rang all over the palace. The doors slammed shut on their own. The guards crossed their halberds, barring the way to all those who had not yet managed to leave.

"Arrest the old man with the white beard!" All-Ears ordered. "Hold him whatever happens. He can't escape, he was the last to leave."

The guards plunged into the crowd.

But the old man with the white beard was not to be found. There was an elderly man in a greasy green jacket, but without a beard.

"It's tricked me again!" All-Ears groaned. "Oh, how I hate it!"

No doubt, dear reader, you guessed long ago who the strange old man with the grey beard was.

Quite right! Of course, it was Vermilion the Artist. It was the easiest thing in the world for him to draw some splendid wrinkles on himself.

And his white beard was our friend, our mutual friend, the Cloud!

Vermilion the Artist left the palace safely — no one even thought of stopping him. His pockets were weighed down with the heavy purses, but this did not gladden him.

"Where has the Cloud got to? I didn't even notice it fly off my chin," he was thinking anxiously. "It will get up to something again. It's so easily carried away and scatter-brained. Quite empty-headed — except for the water, that is..."

Chapter 19

A JOURNEY ON A PLATE OF SEMOLINA

So if you want to know what happened to the Cloud after that follow me!

And if you do not want to, close this book and put it on the shelf, only do not just throw it down somewhere.

After departing from its friend's chin, the Cloud immediately turned into a large white vase.

It simply had to have a bit of a rest and recover.

"I won't leave the palace until I've found out at least something about the secret spring!" the white vase was thinking, only of course no one knew that.

"What's that?" cried the Head Decorator of the palace angrily, walking past. "Who put that white vase there without my knowledge and when? It doesn't fit in with the style of this room at all. It needs livening up with something, flowers perhaps. Yes, a bunch of red roses would do the job!"

"I don't know about others, but I don't like having bunches of red roses put in me at all," thought the Cloud anxiously.

But courtiers were scurrying through the hall all the time, and flying from one place to another was no easy matter.

A servant shuffled past the Cloud, carrying a gold dish of hot semolina above his head and splashing water with his heels.

"One thing I have never turned into is semolina," thought the Cloud.

It flew up without being noticed and sat down right on the semolina. That was not at all nice. The semolina had just come off the stove and was very hot against his back and heels.

The servant carrying the dish was a very timid, one might even say, cowardly person. He was afraid of everything and fear made him slow-witted and hard of hearing.

He had to be told everything twice. People were always shouting to him:

"Go to the kitchen! Hear what I say, go to the kitchen!"

Or:

"Serve up the dish! Hear what I say, serve up the dish!"

Or:

"Take in the semolina, hear what I say?"

Gradually everyone got so used to shouting "Hear what I say!" at him, that this became his name, and now nobody ever called him anything but "Hear what I say".

"I don't know if this is a safe enough place," the Cloud wondered, floating with the semolina from hall to hall. "What if the King begins to spoon me out and put me into his mouth... I can't imagine what would happen then... Well, I'd better think of something quickly..."

The Cloud bent down and whispered to the servant in a terrible voice:

"Now you must stumble and drop the dish of semolina!"

The servant went pale and stumbled, but managed not

to drop the dish. He looked around him terrified, but did not see anyone of course.

"It must be a ghost," he thought in alarm. "I can't see anyone, so that means there's nobody there. But I can hear someone, so that means there's somebody there. And if there is nobody and somebody there, that means it's a ghost!"

"Hear what I say, you must stumble and drop the dish at once!" the Cloud wailed again.

"The ghost even knows my name!" thought the servant in horror. "And if a ghost calls anybody by name, no good will come of it."

He stumbled again, shaking all over, but by an incredible effort kept the dish above his head.

He staggered into the main hall, where the King was already sitting and turning his head impatiently as three servants tripped over one another tying a snow-white napkin round his neck.

"Hear what I say! Stumble and drop the semolina at once!" wailed the Cloud in a frightful voice right into his ear.

The wretched Hear what I say could stand it no longer.

His left toe got caught on his right heel. The poor creature stumbled on an even surface. The gold dish tilted over... To cut things short, this is what happened: Hear what I say, the gold dish and the hot semolina all went flying.

There was general pandemonium.

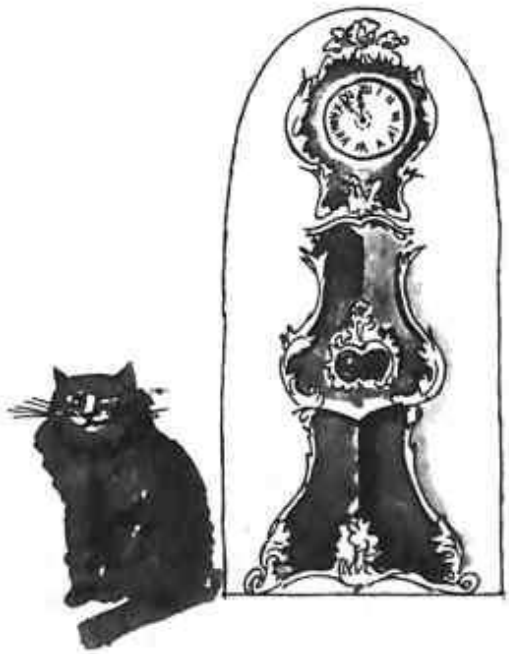
The gold dish clanged and clattered.

The semolina slopped heavily to the floor, spattering everyone with heavy white blobs.

Some covered their face with their hands, others rushed to clean the King's camisole, and nobody noticed the Cloud float over their heads and hang at a window in the form of a dainty lace curtain.

Chapter 20

THE CLOUD DISCOVERS THE KING'S SECRET, WHICH IS VERY GOOD, AND LOSES ITS FREEDOM, WHICH IS VERY BAD



Night fell.

To tell the truth, the Cloud felt uncomfortable and even a bit frightened alone in the empty hall.

Bats would fly to the window, cling to the glass for a moment with open mouths, then slip off and vanish into the darkness.

Several times the Cloud's friend, the old owl Night Philosopher, beat its wing against the window. It was trying to say something, to give a warning perhaps, but the Cloud could not make it out.

The Royal cat, black and fat-bespattered, which was curled up in an armchair, opened its green, slitted eyes and looked disapprovingly at the Cloud.

"What is the matter with me!" the Cloud was angry with itself. "I've gone all soft. Must pull myself together..."

The Cloud flew round the hall, peering into every corner, nook and cranny.

But nowhere was there a lever, a door, or a secret key-hole. Nothing.

"Surely I will discover the secret?" thought the Cloud desperately. "I can't have taken so much trouble to get into the palace for nothing. I was certain it must be here, the secret spring, here in the palace. But I must have been wrong. You should never trust your intuition. Not even a cloud's..."

The Cloud flew round the hall once more and hovered over the black cat.

As a matter of fact cats did not like the Cloud, regarding it as a close relative of rain and puddles. So the Cloud never struck up a conversation with a cat.

But this was its last chance.

"Hey, cat!" the Cloud addressed the black cat. "You live here. Perhaps you know where the King gets all his water from? Is there a secret spring here?"

"Perhaps there is," the cat snorted, twitching its fur fastidiously as the Cloud flew over it.

"There is a spring? And you know where it is?" exclaimed the Cloud, somersaulting three times in the air in excitement.

"Perhaps I do." The cat opened the dazzling green slits of its eyes slightly.

"Then be a friend and tell me!" The Cloud perched on the arm of a chair.

"Give away the secrets of my master, my beloved master? Not on your life! Never! I am no traitor," snorted the cat indignantly, adding unexpectedly: "Give me a mouse and I'll tell you!"

"Change into a mouse! Quickly!" the Cloud whispered to its handkerchief.

"Don't want to!" said the handkerchief stubbornly. "What about a cat? A cat with pleasure."

"Just once, please," whispered the Cloud quickly. "It's very important."

"Oh, all right then..." muttered the handkerchief.

And immediately a mouse ran out from under the armchair where the cat was lying peacefully and scampered over the floor.

"Tell me where the spring is," shouted the Cloud. "Tell me first!"

But the cat did not hear it. With a single bound, as if there were a tightly coiled spring under its coat, it flew halfway across the hall.

Another leap and the cat had the mouse. There was a howl of disappointment.

"Scoundrel!" hissed the cat.

Steps could be heard in the distance.

The Cloud rushed wildly round the hall, not knowing where to hide.

The steps came nearer.

In one corner was a white marble mermaid with a scaly tail. The Cloud dived into another corner, turned into exactly the same mermaid and also stood on its tail.

The famous clock under the bell-case thought for a moment, stopped ticking, then struck three times sadly.

The doors flew open.

Two people came in.

One was carrying a lantern under the edge of his cloak.

They closed the door behind them tightly and put the lantern on the table.

Now the Cloud could see them properly. It was the King and Head Counsellor All-Ears.

"I wonder why they are not asleep?" thought the Cloud in surprise. "As far as I know human beings, it's impossible to drag them out of bed at night. They keep stretching, and yawning, and complaining. It's we clouds who roam the sky day and night knowing no rest."

"So, my dear All-Ears, the Cloud has tricked you once again," said the King sourly. "And what's more I had to give water to a whole crowd of ragamuffins. To say nothing of five purses of gold..."

Miaowing angrily and plaintively, the black cat began to rub itself against the King's galoshes. It pointed with its head to the mermaid, spitting with hate and squinting in that direction with its green eyes.

But the thought of the five lost purses of gold had irritated the King so much that instead of paying attention to his favourite he kicked it out of the way.

All-Ears pressed a bony fist to his forehead.

"Of course, the old man with the beard was the Cloud. No doubt about that. But I shook his hand, just like this...."

All-Ears wanted to shake the King's hand, but the latter pushed him away fastidiously.

"If you don't catch the Cloud, you've had it. Remember that, All-Ears. Now enough talking. It's time to let out the water!"

"Water!" the Cloud was amazed. It trembled on its tail and nearly lost its balance. "What water?"

What happened next was quite incredible. The Cloud decided that it was just a cloud's dream.

The King and All-Ears went up to the throne.

The Cloud strained its mermaid eyes.

As you already know, dear reader, on the back of the throne was the royal coat of arms—a gold bucket with the inscription "Water belongs to the King".

All-Ears put one knee on the throne and with a great effort moved the heavy gold bucket so that it was standing upside down.

There was a sound of creaking wheels from some mechanism under the floor... And the sighs and squeaks of a pump.

All-Ears jumped back.

The King's throne and the massive block of marble on which it stood rose up and moved to one side.

The Cloud craned its neck.

On the spot where the throne had stood was a square black hole.

There was a distant rumbling which turned into a splashing and gurgling.

The King looked down the dark well.

"This way, this way, my water!" he muttered, rubbing his hands. "Come to me, my little darling! Everyone longs for you: dry throats, parched stomachs. Everyone dreams about you: humans and birds, dogs and trees. But you are mine, mine alone!"

"Your Majesty," All-Ears said worriedly, looking down the well over the King's shoulder. "Have you noticed that there is less and less water every year? After you blocked it up, the underground spring began boring itself a new channel. It is going deeper and deeper under the ground."

"Never mind," the King waved his hand unconcernedly. "There's enough water for the next hundred years or so. For me and my son."

"And after that?"

"Why should I worry about what happens after that? I'm too busy filling the cellars with gold."

Down in the darkness something shone like a wet mirror. It rose higher and higher, brimmed over the edge and rippled over the floor in waves.

It was water.

It swirled round All-Ears' black galoshes.

The water opened the doors on its path. It flowed from room to room and on, down the marble staircase.

The Cloud could not contain itself any longer. It threw all caution to the winds.

"Water! Water! Water!" it cried, dancing on its mermaid tail.

But while the Cloud has forgotten all caution, someone else still had his wits about him.

"That's it!" All-Ears cried in a whisper, pointing a crooked finger at the Cloud.

In the twinkling of an eye he pulled a cord.

The doors slammed. Bells rang all over the palace. There was a tramping of feet and a clanging of weapons.

The Cloud flew up to the ceiling in dismay and hung there, its tail curled round a chandelier.

"It has discovered my secret!" croaked the King. He was obviously about to blow bubbles.

All-Ears quickly turned the gold bucket on the back of the throne. The throne and the block of marble slipped back into place.

"Got you now, my pretty one!" whispered All-Ears, taking a deep breath. "You can't escape from here. Turn into anything you like, you won't frighten us."

"We'll see," exclaimed the mermaid and suddenly produced a dense fog. Everything disappeared from view. The fog was as thick as pea soup.

"Where am I?" shouted the King, lost in the fog. "I'm lost! Where is my kingdom? Where is my throne? Come here, All-Ears!"

"I am here, Your Majesty!" All-Ears stretched out his arms and rushed off towards the King's voice, but unfortunately poked his finger right into the King's eye.

"You don't know yet what a fine hairdresser I am!" the fog gave a hollow laugh. Its voice boomed from all sides at once—above, below and all the corners of the room. "I'll give you a lovely hair-do now!"

At that moment the hair of All-Ears and the King crackled and stood on end. The King's fat cat jumped onto the back of a chair. Its fur was sticking up in the most unusual fashion. It had turned into a fluffy black

ball with two green lights. The cat mewed plaintively, sending off sparks in all directions.

"No, it doesn't suit me to be a fog!" came the Cloud's voice. "A fog is something gooey, sloppy and stupid. But right now I want to be someone fierce and bitey...

The fog immediately began to lighten, like milk diluted with water. Through it appeared the throne, gilt chairs, and black windows.

A moment later it vanished.

Then everyone saw a tall white crocodile in the middle of the room. The crocodile opened its jaws wide. Its belly touching the floor and its whole body wriggling, it started crawling towards the King.

The King clambered onto his throne.

Hissing like a fire extinguisher, the cat crouched on the soft upholstery of the chair.

"Don't be afraid, Your Majesty! It's only a Cloud," All-Ears gasped. "A boring, bad-mannered Cloud. It can only fly over trees and pour rain on miserable village roofs. I invited it to play cards once, but it got cold feet and flew away. I assure you, it can't read or write. It doesn't even know what a clock is and what it is for..."

"I don't know what a clock is?" the crocodile barked, beside itself with rage. "I'll have you know that all the tower clocks in the world are my friends. I know their hands. I have perched on their pendulums. And they have told me what time is and why it cannot be stopped."

"You're lying!" All-Ears whispered. "You're having me on. I'll never believe you. There's a clock. You just tell us the time?"

"All right, I will!"

"No, you won't!"

"Yes, I will!"

Patches of soot fell down the chimney from the enormous fireplace. Down the chimney in a black cloud

came Sooty. He fell straight into the ashes, and turned from black to grey.

"This way!" he shouted to the Cloud, rubbing his eyes and coughing. "Fly up the chimney, quick!"

The King seized Sooty by the arm.

"I've caught a spy!"

But such is life that no king can ever hold a chimney sweep by the arm for long. Sooty slipped away and ran towards the Cloud:

"Follow me! Quickly, dear Cloud!"

"But first I'll show this ignoramus that he doesn't know a thing about clouds!" Puffing angrily the crocodile crawled to the clock.

The old master's clever clock ticked loudly and agitatedly. It wanted to warn the Cloud about the danger, of course, but the Cloud was obviously so offended that it had lost its head.

"You'll see what a real cloud can do!" it bellowed. "The hour hand has passed the number three... Ugh! I'll show you! Now the minute hand... Wait a bit..."

The Cloud was trying so hard that it turned into a clock itself.

"I'll even take off the bell-case so you can see better!" All-Ears tiptoed up and removed the bell-case that protected the clock from the damp.

There was a worried silence, then the wise clock struck thirteen, which clocks do only in the most exceptional circumstances.

"Twenty-five minutes past three. See?" exclaimed the Cloud triumphantly.

At that moment All-Ears marched up to the Cloud and quickly popped the bell-case over it.

"That's it, Your Majesty!" he said quietly and wearily. "Now let's deal with the chimney sweep."

But Sooty was nowhere to be seen. Only some light black flakes were falling out of the chimney.

The Cloud thrashed about in the cramped bell-case. It had turned as white as whipped cream. Its clock hands whizzed round madly, chasing each other.

"Oh, well, I'll stay here then! I like it very much here," the Cloud shouted. Its voice sounded hollow and faint from the bell-case. "You still can't do anything to me!"

"So that's what you think, is it?" All-Ears whispered gleefully. He said it very quietly, but the more quietly he spoke, the better he could be heard. "We'll freeze you!"

"How did you know?" the Cloud trembled.

"Oh, a drunken Cloud told me..." said All-Ears casually. But his eyes were shining with malice and triumph.

"I've had it..." groaned the Cloud. "I knew everything would end very badly..."

His clock hands stopped.

Chapter 21

HOW ROSITTA THE TOAD APPEARED ON BARBATOOTS' TABLE

Raggity was weeping.

Not weeping, but sobbing. She had been sobbing for five hours nonstop. Her nose was swollen, and she had lost half her freckles.

Raggity put her hands over her mouth and threw herself face down on a pillow, but she still could not stop.

Over her, fists clenched aggressively, stood Barbatoots.

She had tried to calm Raggity in what she considered the most reliable method: by thumping the back of her neck several times and pulling first one plait, then the other. But even that did not help.

Then Barbatoots caught hold of Raggity, turned the girl to face her and shook her so angrily that it was a wonder Raggity's head stayed on her shoulders and did not fly out of the window, say.

"Tell me what's happened!"

Raggity went on sobbing.

"Answer me, you naughty girl!"

Raggity only wept more bitterly.

Then Barbatoots behaved in the most strange and unexpected fashion. A hoarse groan escaped from her chest. She took Raggity into her bony arms, pressed the girl to her, and breathing faster and faster suddenly burst out sobbing too.

"Have pity on me, an old woman... I can't bear to hear you cry! I can't bear it! I'll die! Just tell me what's happened?"

Then Raggity, still weaping, told her about her friendship with the Cloud, and about Vermilion and Sooty. And about the Cloud flying away to the palace and disappearing.

Barbatoots blew her nose deafeningly on the hem of her skirt.

"Why are we sitting here doing nothing? Let's go to this Vermilion or whatever his name is. Where's my shawl?"

Barbatoots began to rush around the room, knocking over chairs and benches with surprising agility.

"Why should I go looking for this Cloud!" she muttered. "What is a Cloud? Nothing but damp, slush and thin air—that's all. Who have I got mixed up with in my old age, silly old fool... A naughty little girl and a piece of damp!"

A handful of sand thudded against the window. Barbatoots opened the window.

"Is that your artist? Long hair and covered with paint."

It really was Vermilion the Artist under the window.

"Come here, paint-splasher! And make it snappy!" Barbatoots shouted to him.

Vermilion came into the room. He was carrying a small checked bundle in his hand. It was actually a handkerchief in which something was moving.

Vermilion put the bundle carefully onto the table and untied it. Inside was Rositta the Toad. She was breathing hoarsely and wearily. Her belly rose and fell. Her eyes looked worried and serious.

"What!" howled Barbatoots. "Putting a toad on my table! Ugh! Take the horrid thing away! Throw it out of the window!

Barbatoots seized the corner of the handkerchief and pulled with all her might, but Raggity managed to catch Rositta in mid-air. She clasped her to her breast:

"It's Rositta the Toad! She's the Cloud's friend!"

"What an old harridan I am!" Barbatoots raised her arms to the ceiling as if only the ceiling could understand and sympathise with her. "Who have I got mixed up with? A naughty girl, a Cloud, a paint-splasher and a toad. No, it's time to boil my bones for soup! High time!"

Rositta the Toad coughed and squeaked in Raggity's hands.

"Hee... Cri... Phe... Trr... Frr... Qua..."

"She is saying," Raggity explained, "that nobody knows anything about it. The bats have forgotten everything, because they have been hanging upside down too long. The Night Philosopher saw the Cloud. It turned itself into a curtain and hung at a window. But then a lamp was brought in and he could not see any more."

A black pigeon sat on the window-sill. Black as a raven. His claws left little black crosses on the sill.

"That's not one of my pigeons! Shoo! Off with you!" yelled Barbatoots.

"That's Sooty's pigeon!" exclaimed Raggity.

And to be sure there under the window was Sooty.

Barbatoots looked as if she were about to burst with rage.

"I knew something was missing! That's it. A chimney sweep! Just the thing! No, it's time they minced me up for sausage meat."

"Can I call him in?" Raggity begged.

"All right, go on!" Barbatoots folded her arms on her chest gloomily. "I don't care. Invite all the toads, artists, chimney sweeps, Tom, Dick and Harrys you like. Don't take any notice of me, please. I'm just a pie filling, that's all."

Sooty entered the room. He was like a skeleton painted black. The breeze from the window made him sway.

"Well, have you found anything out?" Raggity asked impatiently.

"I sat in the chimney for five days," said Sooty very weakly. "I thought night had come for good. I almost believed it. But my pigeon fed me. It stole crumbs from the kitchen."

"There you are!" Barbatoots beat her forehead so hard that a big bruise came up at once. "Getting mixed up with a naughty girl, a slushy wet thing, a paint-

splasher and a toad. Ugh!" She stared balefully in the direction of Rositta the Toad. "Now it's feed the starving chimney sweeps!"

Barbatoots rushed into the kitchen and returned a moment later with a plateful of crusty pies.

"Eat them up, at once!" she ordered.

"But what about the Cloud? Don't you know anything about it?" asked Raggity miserably.

"Didn't I tell you?" Sooty looked sadly at Raggity. "They popped a bell-case over it. Then they said: 'We're going to freeze you.'"

Rositta the Toad raised her head and croaked desperately. Two transparent green tears fell from her eyes.

Vermilion turned aside in despair.

"All is lost..." whispered Raggity. "I shall never see it again, my Cloud..."

Everyone in the room fell silent. The way people do when something terrible happens and they don't know how to comfort one another.

"I know!" Barbatoots shouted suddenly. "Why didn't I think of it before? Why are there guards by the cellar? And cannons? Why is nobody allowed near it! It must be there, your precious Cloud!"

"Isn't there a chimney? Not even a narrow one?" Sooty asked naively. He was twirling a pie in his hand, without taking a bite out of it.

"Of course there isn't, you silly duffer!" snorted Barbatoots contemptuously. "If there were a chimney, there would have to be a stove. And what sort of stove would you expect to find in an ice-cellar?"

"But perhaps we could somehow?" asked Raggity desperately.

"No somehows!" Barbatoots retorted sharply. "They're not letting anyone in there. Understand?"

"But if you were to try?"

"I'm not going to."

"But..."

"And don't ask me to!" Barbatoots cut her short. "I've told you, nothing can be done. You must forget about that Cloud.

Chapter 22

CAN THE KING EAT SEMOLINA MADE WITH WATER?

It was as hot as hell itself in the kitchen.

The men cooks' faces were bright crimson, the women cooks' red, and the kitchen-boys' pink.

Only Raggity's was a pale green.

Barbatoots had taken her to the palace for the first time.

Raggity stared in alarm at the huge stove. It hissed and puffed like a dragon with boiling saucepans and frying pans spitting fat, instead of a head.

The King was preparing for a feast.

"We will have a celebration today," he announced to his courtiers, "but for an unknown reason. I know it, of course, but there is no need whatever for you to know. Today we shall drink to something and rejoice at something. And whoever does not want to rejoice with us can go straight to gaol."

Crisp pies were sizzling in the oven, countless turkeys and ducks were roasting on spits, and a chocolate cake was whispering something most interesting. Its brown bubbles rose and fell, and from each burst bubble wafted at least fifteen delicious aromas.

So it was not in the least surprising that stray cats were sitting on all the roofs sniffing in the direction of

the Royal Kitchens. They screwed up their eyes and licked their lips.

"Dear Barbatoots!" said the Head Cook, tiptoeing up to her. "The main dish is to be prepared by you alone, of course. You are to make your divine semolina. Five cans of milk have been brought for it."

Barbatoots looked in all the five cans. She sniffed the milk suspiciously and waved her hands over the cans.

Then she ladled some milk out of one can, tasted it, and winced.

"It's sour!" she growled.

She tried some milk from the second can, and grimaced:

"So is this!"

She tried the third and the fourth...

"What have you brought me? It's gone off!"

The milk turned out to be sour in all five cans.

The Head Cook was most alarmed.

"What's that? How could it have turned sour?" he asked, turning pale.

"How, how," Barbatoots imitated him. "It's so sweltering in here, I've nearly turned sour myself, to say nothing of the milk."

The Head Cook was white as a sheet now.

"Dear Barbatoots, I shall immediately order all the royal cows to be milked again. Rest assured, I shall make them. You will have your milk."

"And it will go sour too," smirked Barbatoots, venomously. "There's nothing for it, today I shall have to make the semolina with water!"

"With water!" There was fear not only in the Head Cook's eyes, but even in his glasses. "But no king has ever eaten semolina made with water!"

"Well, ours will have to try it today. It can't be helped. Semolina made with water..."

"No, no! Don't say those awful words! Surely something can be done?"

"No, nothing!" barked Barbatoots firmly.

"But do try, I beseech you!"

"No, no, nothing can be done. Although perhaps..."

"Yes, what? What? Tell us, please!"

"If we got some... No, that's impossible."

"But tell us, all the same, dear Barbatoots!"

"If we got some ice from the cellar and put the milk on ice it would not go sour."

The cook recoiled a few paces and waved his hands hopelessly.

"That's impossible! You know perfectly well, they're not letting anyone into the cellar!"

"That's what I keep telling you, that it's impossible. I'll just make the semolina with wa..."

"Don't say those terrible words," the cook screamed. "My fish in aspic! It will be frantic. And my whipped cream will be worried. And the King cannot stand worried whipped cream!"

"It can't be helped, I'll have to use wa..."

"All right! I'll try. The Captain of the King's Guards is my cousin twice removed. A splendid fellow. So high-minded, considerate and unselfish..."

"That's your business," said Barbatoots disinterestedly and turned away. But she squeezed Raggity's hand so hard enough to break it.

"I'll go down to the cellar myself and fetch a bucket of ice." The Head Cook wrapped a warm scarf round his neck with a sigh and pulled his cook's hat down over his ears.

"Off you go then, old chap!" Barbatoots laughed so deafeningly, that the chocolate cake gave a gentle sigh and slumped to one side.

"What's the matter?" the Head Cook asked worriedly.

"You have to know a thing or two about ice too. Blue ice is too cold, so the milk will freeze. Yellow ice melts too quickly. And you must on no account take green ice—it is sometimes poisonous, particularly at the end of the month..."

"Barbatoots!" implored the Head Cook. "Do me a favour: go and get it yourself. I don't know anything about it."

"Not on your life. My nose is blocked up as it is." Barbatoots honked threateningly.

"I beg you!"

"All my bones ache. And my legs give me trouble at night."

"I implore you!"

"And I've got a bad cough!" Barbatoots gave a hacking cough.

"I entreat you!"

"Oh, very well," Barbatoots agreed reluctantly.

"I don't know how to thank you, dear Barbatoots!" the Head Cook exclaimed in relief.

He hastily grabbed half-a-dozen roast ducks, a stuffed turkey, two sucking pigs and a huge fish on a silver dish.

"Who's that for?" asked Barbatoots slyly.

The Head Cook looked slightly embarrassed.

"My cousin twice removed... He's a terribly unselfish person... But he doesn't like people coming to him empty-handed, you know..."

And, throwing another three strings of sausages round his neck, the Head Cook left the kitchen.

Chapter 23

CLOUD, WHERE ARE YOU?

The Head Cook returned to the kitchen empty-handed, even without the silver dish.

His clothes were stained with grease. The spot on his stomach resembled a turkey, the one on his left side a sucking pig, and the one on his right a duck.

"Such a fine unselfish person!" he said, wiping his greasy hands.

"Hurry up, girl! You're coming with me!" growled Barbatoots, dealing Raggity a sharp cuff on the head.

Grabbing an empty bucket and pushing Raggity in front of her, she left the kitchen.

The cellar looked like a beseiged fortress.

Black cannon muzzles poked threateningly out of peaceful bushes of pink and yellow roses. There was a smell of gunpowder and smouldering fuses.

Leaning against a pile of cannon-balls was the Captain of the King's Guards gnawing a turkey leg with great relish.

Barbatoots walked past the guards, deliberately banging a cannon muzzle with the empty bucket.

The cellar door sported a large new lock.

The Captain of the King's Guards inserted the key and had difficulty in turning it with his slippery greasy fingers.

Barbatoots snatched the lighted lantern from the guard and set off down the narrow staircase. Raggity

hurried after her, afraid of being left behind.

Raggity followed the flickering light and Barbatoots' huge shadow. Behind them marched the Captain of the King's Guards, hiccuping on his full stomach.

It was a long way down.

The damp crept up her legs, to her stomach and then to the top of her head.

Raggity heard a rythmic tapping from somewhere below, as if twenty woodpeckers were pecking away at a strong pine tree.

"What are woodpeckers doing here?" she wondered.

But it was not woodpeckers at all. It was four guards squatting round a lighted lamp, their teeth chattering with the cold.

They were warming their hands on it. Embracing the lamp their huge hands looked red and transparent.

Barbatoots pushed them roughly out of the way and kicked open the heavy brass-bound door.

She and Raggity entered the huge ice-cellar.

The light from the lamp shone on jagged blocks of ice. In the far corners the frightened darkness stirred.

The lumps of ice were piled up like transparent mountains, fortresses, and towers, like heavy crystal bridges.

On the walls were icy patterns, arrows and pointed stars.

A shiver ran down Raggity's spine. But not from the cold. Only now did she realise how difficult it would be to find the Cloud.

"Get your ... hic ... ice, hurry up!" exclaimed the Captain of the King's Guards. "I've got a ... hic ... turkey and half a dozen ... hic ... ducks waiting for me upstairs. And those gunners are terrible rogues..."

"Go on..." Barbatoots whispered to Raggity.

Raggity began turning over the heavy, slippery blocks of ice.

"Hurry up!" the Captain of the King's Guards shouted angrily. "Oh! They're already ... hic ... munching my bones, I mean my ducks' bones!"

Raggity's hands were numb with cold. She had cut them on the sharp edges of the ice

"I'll never find the Cloud here in a month of Sundays..." she thought in despair.

Barbatoots was probably thinking the same thing.

"Let's go. It's no good..." she whispered.

Raggity shook her head stubbornly.

"I won't go without the Cloud... I'd rather freeze..."

Barbatoots looked at Raggity, nodded and suddenly smiled a quiet smile.

"She's smiling!" Raggity could not understand it. "At a time like this?"

"Come on, out you go!" growled the Captain of the King's Guards, grabbing Raggity roughly by the shoulder.

He obviously did not know Barbatoots.

She leapt up and jammed the empty bucket over his head. Then she banged with her fist on the bottom, and the deafened Captain of the King's Guards sat down on the floor as meek as a lamb.

"Hurry up!" Barbatoots shouted to Raggity.

Raggity looked about her in despair.

Suddenly, in the silence that followed, she heard a faint snore and a sleepy heavy breathing.

She tugged with all her might at a heavy block of ice, shifted it to one side, and began pulling down the blocks of ice that were piled high. Her fingers were bleeding, but she took no notice of it.

Right at the bottom she saw a piece of ice that looked very strange indeed.

It was like a clock. A very old clock with broken hands.

Raggity bent over it. She heard a faint groan.

"Found it!" she whispered, beside herself with joy.

"Come on, lazybones!" wailed Barbatoots. "I'm frozen to the marrow!"

Raggity pressed the ice clock to her. She dropped the icy hands into her apron pocket with the transparent wheels and springs that had fallen out of the clock.

Barbatoots put her shawl on Raggity's shoulders to hide the ice clock. She pulled the unusual helmet off the Captain of the King's Guards head, and quickly filled the bucket with ice.

The Captain of the King's Guards followed them obediently in a daze, swaying and bumping his shoulders against the walls of the narrow staircase.

The guards were piling up the cannon-balls by the cellar. They could hardly hold them in their fatty fingers. Their lips and cheeks shone greasily.

The roast ducks, turkey and sucking pig had vanished into thin air.

"Forgot to feed the pigeons again, you lazy good-for-nothing!" shouted Barbatoots in a terrible voice. "Off you go, home!"

Raggity ran down the path.

Barbatoots picked up a stone and threw it after Raggity. But for some reason the stone went in the opposite direction.

Raggity pulled the shawl more tightly round the Cloud.

Ice-cold water was trickling down her stomach. The sun was baking hot, but Raggity was chilled to the bone. She was afraid the cold would reach her heart and stop it beating.

The Cloud was getting lighter and lighter. It stirred, sighed sleepily, then began to yawn and stretch.

Suddenly Raggity felt something cold round her neck—the Cloud had worked its arm free.

She went timidly up to the big iron gates.

Limp with the heat, Lankey-Legged Ginger and Ginger the Thug had flopped down on the ground with their backs leaning against the gates.

"Stop!" shouted Ginger the Thug.

"Oh, shut up..." Lankey-Legged Ginger muttered weakly.

"She's hiding something under her shawl," Ginger the Thug retorted suspiciously.

"It's Barbatoots' girl. Leave her alone. That's my advice to you," said Lankey-Legged Ginger lazily, managing to unstick his sweaty eyelids.

"What have you got under that shawl?" growled Ginger the Thug.

Ginger the Thug dragged Raggity to him by the shoulder. He thrust a hand under her shawl and pulled it out at once.

"Freezing cold!" he exclaimed in surprise. "There's nothing there, but it's as cold as a frog's belly!"

Raggity skipped quickly through the gates.

She crossed the Square of the Solitary Cow and ran home along the familiar streets to Barbatoots' house.

Vermilion, Sooty and Rositta the Toad were waiting for her anxiously and impatiently.

Chapter 24

WHAT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU SLIP ON SOME LEMON PEEL

Barbatoots marched triumphantly into the kitchen with a bucketful of ice.

Two timid rosy-cheeked girls brought a can of milk.

Barbatoots kicked the bucket over and the ice flew out over the floor.

"You're crazy, dear Barbatoots!" exclaimed the Head Cook in alarm. "What are you doing? The milk will go sour again!"

"No, it won't," said Barbatoots mysteriously. "Do you think the milk's as silly as you? No, my dear man, it need only know that there is ice in the kitchen."

And this time the milk really did not go sour.

It ran into the saucepan in a thick white stream. Barbatoots clambered up onto a stool.

Never before had she made semolina with such inspiration.

The cooks and kitchen-boys huddled against the walls in alarm.

Barbatoots' face rose and fell through the clouds of steam.

The ladle in her hands spun like a mad thing.

She even sung something under her breath. It was extraordinary. No one had ever heard her sing before.

As you already know, dear reader, the Head Cook's cousin twice removed was the Captain of the King's Guards. But the Head Cook also had an ordinary cousin and he was a sea pirate.

Listening to Barbatoots' song, the Head Cook even felt a pang of fear. The song reminded him very much of a most bloodthirsty pirate ditty.

"Semolina's ready!" shouted Barbatoots, throwing the ladle into the corner.

And what semolina it was! It was like cream, whipped cream, hot ice-cream, sea foam—anything you like except ordinary semolina.

Barbatoots climbed down from the stool, exhausted.

The Head Cook took her arm and led her to the door, and Barbatoots set off home.

"I must try my sweet sauce," said the Head Cook, in a tired, but reassured voice. "I hope it's not too worried..."

He walked over to the stove where the sweet sauce was bubbling and gurgling mysteriously.

But accidents can happen to anyone. Even to a Head Cook. And anywhere. Even on the absolutely safe way to a stove where a sweet sauce is bubbling in a saucepan.

So, the Head Cook had not taken three steps before he stepped on something and fell to the floor with a crash.

"Who put that there? Who wanted me to fall down?" he growled, getting to his feet with difficulty and holding half a squeezed lemon in his hand.

Silence fell in the kitchen. Only the pans and saucepans on the stove went prattling on carelessly about something.

"I know!" the smallest kitchen-boy chirped unexpectedly. His name was Peppersalt. He couldn't do anything yet, except pass the cooks the pepper and salt when they needed them. Peppersalt chirped "I know!" and immediately regretted it.

Everyone looked at him. He curled up with fright. Had he been able to, he would have crawled into his own cook's hat which was larger than he was.

"Who was it?"

"That old woman who made the semolina!" whispered the Peppersalt wretchedly.

"Barbatoots?"

"She cut the lemons in half and squeezed them into the milk cans..."

"You're lying! I'll cut off your ears!"

"It's true!" squeaked Pèppersalt, sweating with fear. "She squeezed them, then threw them under the bench."

The Head Cook went down on his hands and knees

and crawled under the bench himself. A pile of squeezed lemons lay there.

"I don't understand it..." he spread out his hands in complete confusion. "Lemon juice makes milk go sour straightaway. Why should she do that? Then she herself asked for some ice..."

The Head Cook clapped a hand to his mouth quickly.

He looked round at everyone wildly without saying a word.

His tall hat rose up on its own—the Head Cook's hair was standing on end.

Without saying a word he rushed out of the kitchen.

Chapter 25

WHAT STOPPED THE CLOUD FROM DESCRIBING ITS DREAM

The Cloud was sitting on the bed sneezing loudly.

It looked like goodness knows what. Raggity's head with pigtails sticking out in a funny way, All-Ears' long arms, and an hour and minute hands on its tummy. A fish's tail with scales sticking out from under the blanket was all that remained of the mermaid.

"A-tishoo!" sneezed the Cloud loudly, and the thunder in it rattled like a teaspoon in a cracked glass.

"Bless you!" said Sooty and Vermilion in unison.

Rositta the Toad was sitting in a soup bowl of water, rolling her popping eyes blissfully.

Raggity—smiling rapturously—was feeding the Cloud tea with raspberry jam.

"Drink it up before it gets cold," she was urging the Cloud.

Barbatoots rushed into the room, muttering.

She knocked the cup of tea out of Raggity's hand, pulled the blanket off the bed and grabbed at the Cloud.

She tried to sieze it by the arm, then by the tail, but, as you can well imagine, this was quite impossible.

"Ouch, you're tickling!" the Cloud wriggled and giggled.

"What?" cried Barbatoots. "It's not here at all! All that trouble for a bit of nothing!"

"A-tishoo!" The Cloud almost split in two.

"It's sneezing..." Barbatoots was so surprised that she collapsed heavily into a chair. "Oh, I'm so tired..."

"The main thing is that I now know ... a-tishoo..." the Cloud said excitedly, "that the spring is under the King's throne in the main hall. It must be ... a-tishoo! I mean, it must be released. Then the river will fill up ... a-tishoo ... with water. Grass will grow all over the kingdom. The trees will turn green. And the flowers will remember ... a-tishoo ... how to bloom!"

"But will the King agree?" asked Raggity timidly.

"When the Cloud helped me to get five purses of gold, I began to paint portraits again," said Vermilion pensively. "But rich people do not come to visit me now. I have started painting ordinary people. And it is far more interesting, you know. You don't find another face gazing through. Everything about them is real:

courage and honesty. I have painted the Great Clockmaker. Each of his wrinkles speaks of wisdom. I have made friends with gunsmiths. I have painted blacksmiths in the glow of red-hot coals. They are all brave men. They will not beg the King for favours. They will demand them."

Barbatoots jumped forward and seized Vermilion by the shoulders.

"My friends may only be simple cooks and bakers," she shouted, "but they will beat your stupid gunsmiths within an inch of their lives with poker and ladle!"

"Dear Barbatoots," the artist smiled, "there's no need for your friends to fight my friends. We must all unite, then the King will have to give in," said Vermilion.

This time the Cloud coughed so hard that its head and arms fell off and floated around under the ceiling, coughing and sneezing, until they managed to join on again.

"What are you goggling at?" Barbatoots rounded on Raggity. "Wrap it up more warmly. Bandage its throat. And put mustard plasters on it, that's the thing to do!"

"Mustard plasters?" the Cloud was interested. "I swear by thunder, I'll be the first Cloud ever to have mustard plasters. I don't think I mind..."

"First we must take its temperature. The thermometer! Where's the thermometer?" shouted Barbatoots.

For some reason the thermometer was found in the basket with dirty linen.

Barbatoots poised it over the Cloud like a dagger.

"Put it under your arm. But where is this wretched Cloud's arm? Come on, tell us where your arm is?"

Finally they put the thermometer on the bed. The Cloud lay down on top of it, but the thermometer immediately broke into a thousand small pieces.

"Oh, dear. Its temperature is a hundred!" said Raggity in alarm.

Barbatoots began flapping about.

"It needs a doctor, a physician! But who? I don't know one that specialises in clouds. Perhaps we should call a vet?"

"Don't worry...." drawled the Cloud, who was actually rather pleased by all the fuss. "I just happened to strike the thermometer with lightning, that's all..."

"You're pretending!" Barbatoots accused it. "You should be ashamed of yourself, you damp old thing. And this frog is probably ravenous too." Barbatoots poked Rositta the Toad, who was sitting in the soup bowl. "Ugh. Hey, you! Everybody quick march to catch some flies."

Vermilion and Sooty caught some flies at the window.

Rositta the Toad daintily ate five flies and one mosquito.

"Qua... Chee... Pshee..." Rositta croaked politely.

"What's she saying?" asked Barbatoots sternly. "Can't understand a word of it."

"She says," Raggity explained, "that in old age one must think about noble things, not about flies."

"Showing off, you silly old toad," said Barbatoots, looking at Rositta with respect. "Ask her if she'd like a cup of coffee."

"I shouldn't think so," Raggity shook her head.

"I had such a strange dream when I was lying in the ice-cellar!" The Cloud thought it was not getting enough attention. "I dreamt I had fallen asleep on some flowers and was being eaten by a big cloud cow. When they started milking her I turned into cloud milk. It was very interesting. No, listen to what happened next. It's even more interesting. I was in a carpenter's shop and got stuck on a stool covered with carpenter's glue..."

But before the Cloud could describe the rest of its strange dream twelve fists began pounding on Barbatoots' door.

Chapter 26

A TAR BARREL

So while our friends were sitting in the small room under the roof and the Cloud was telling them its dreams, twelve fists began pounding on the door.

Barbatoots leaned out of the window. From up there she could see nothing but iron helmets and lances, as if the armourer had spread out his wares in her back yard.

In fact the tiny yard by her house was packed with armed guards.

A detachment of mounted guards emerged from the alley on the left. Three big cannons were trundled out of the street on the right.

People flocked from all around to Barbatoots' house.

Barbatoots yawned so frighteningly, that the front raws of guards stepped back.

"Why have you come to visit me without an invitation? And you didn't let me have my after dinner nap!"

"We know all about it, Barbatoots! About your tricks with the lemons!" yelped the Head Cook, who im-

mediately proceeded to gulp down his tranquiliser drops straight from the bottle.

"Hey, Barbatoots! Hand over the girl and the Cloud to us!" shouted the Captain of the King's Guards threateningly. "Then the King will forgive you!"

"I'd rather make soup of myself than give you such a nice girl and such a wonderful Cloud!" snapped Barbatoots and slammed the window.

The Head Gaoler ran round the corner and said to Raggity, who was looking out of the window:

"My dear little orphan girl, my poor mite! Hand over that horrid old woman and that good-for-nothing Cloud to us, and the King will give you a real live mother and father!"

In reply Raggity only stuck out her tongue.

The Head Gaoler's assistant, who dreamed of being Head Gaoler himself and making the Head Gaoler his assistant, ran round the house from the other side and shouted to Vermilion who appeared at the window:

"Hey, artist! Hand over the Cloud, the old woman and the girl to us, and the King will proclaim you the best artist in the kingdom!"

But the artist only shook his fist at him.

Sooty, who had decided to get a better look at what was going on in the yard, dived into the hearth, climbed quickly up the chimney onto the roof and sat on the chimney pot.

"Chimney sweep!" Head Counsellor All-Ears called softly to him.

All-Ears was here too, of course. You would have noticed him at once. He was standing by the carriage in his black galoshes as usual.

He spoke very softly. But he was heard by everyone, even the deaf old trumpet player who lived three streets away from Barbatoots.

"Hand over the Cloud, the old woman, the girl and the artist to us! I will have you covered in gold from head to foot. You will be the only gold chimney sweep in the world."

"Save it for your galoshes!" Sooty shouted at him, making a rude face at him.

The Cloud split into four pieces and looked out of all four windows at the same time.

"Oh, dear. It looks as if we're surrounded..." it muttered anxiously. "Pity I didn't teach Raggity to fly. She's so good and kind she might have been able to learn... Well, now... What's to be done?"

The Cloud looked at the hearth.

"Hey, Sooty!" it shouted. "Let out Barbatoots' pigeons. They know what to do."

"You wet, misty, damp, slushy thing! Giving orders in my house! Who's in charge here, you or me?"

And Barbatoots tried to pummell the Cloud with all her might.

Her fists went straight through the Cloud, and it took no notice.

It was thinking hard about something and frowning.

At last Barbatoots banged her fist painfully on the back of a chair. She dropped her arms, breathing heavily.

In the meantime the doves had all left the dove-cot, circled over the house and flown off, led by Sooty's black pigeon.

"Break down the doors! They must be taken dead or alive," whispered All-Ears. "Better not alive..."

An old gunsmith stepped out of the crowd.

He stuck his heavy sword in the ground and placed his hands on it.

"We want to know what the two children, the old woman and the artist have done?" he asked in

an old tired voice.

Ten guards seized the gunsmith by the arms and shoulders. But ten young gunsmiths tore the old man from their clutches and threw the guards to the ground.

"All we've done is to find out the King's secret! Nothing else!" yelled Barbatoots, leaning out of the window.

"Knock the door down!" shouted the Captain of the King's Guards.

But a crowd of bakers, potters and weavers rose up in front of the door, as if from out of the ground.

"Load the cannons!"

But the blacksmiths and gunsmiths pushed the gunners away from the cannons. They turned the heavy cannons round and aimed them at the guards. Then All-Ears whispered something strange:

"The tar..."

No one had time to collect his wits.

Lankey-Legged Ginger and Ginger the Thug rolled out a small black barrel from somewhere.

They heaved it up with a groan—although a small one, the barrel was obviously heavy—shook it and banged it against a corner of the house.

The barrel cracked and broke. Thick, sticky tar spread over the wall and began to drip down. Lankey-Legged Ginger threw a lighted torch over the heads of the by-standers. The wall of the house immediately caught fire. An orange flame leapt up. Black trails of ragged smoke began to spiral.

"A fire! A fire! I'm frightened!" screamed a thin child's voice.

In this waterless kingdom a fire was a terrible disaster. It was used to frighten naughty children.

The flame seemed to guess that it was master, that everyone was helpless before it, and it leapt over the second wall, the porch and the door.

"Listen, everybody!" shouted Barbatoots, rubbing some black soot on her cheek. "Listen: the King has stolen your water! Do you hear? The Great Spring is in the palace! Under the King's throne!"

"Silence her!" croaked All-Ears.

Pushing the guards aside, a crowd of carpenters rushed up to the burning house. They were carrying axes and dragging long ladders.

"Get back!" yelled the guards.

There was pandemonium in Barbatoots' little yard. The fence crashed down and the gates collapsed. Fists flew. There was the sound of breaking lances and the clash of sabres against stonemasons' hammers.

The guards were driven into a small street and pinned against the wall.

The carpenters immediately put up long ladders on all four sides of the burning house. The blacksmiths brought Raggity and Sooty down, passing them from hand to hand.

Down another ladder came Vermilion the Artist holding Rositta the Toad wrapped in a check handkerchief.

Barbatoots stood for a moment on the window-sill, her arms folded on her chest. She looked round and stared into the burning house.

The flames there were roaring.

"Come on, Barbatoots!" shouted Raggity crying.

And Barbatoots also came down.

The last to leave the house was the Cloud. It was striped and spotted from soot.

The carpenters hewed at the burning logs with their axes, dragged them away from the house and poured sand on them.

The gunsmiths surrounded All-Ears, the Captain of the King's Guards and the Head Gaoler. The bakers and weavers collected the weapons dropped by the guards in their fright.

But the flames had already engulfed the whole house — dancing orange tongues of fire, each capped with smoke.

The roof caved in with a crash. Sparks and red brands flew in all directions.

The thatched roof on the small house where the old umbrella maker had moved recently, began to smoulder, then burst into flames.

Then the poor lace-maker' house with a dry shingle roof caught fire. The dry wood flared up at once. It burned furiously, sending out sprays of sparks.

The Cloud rushed straight into the fire gushing out streams of water.

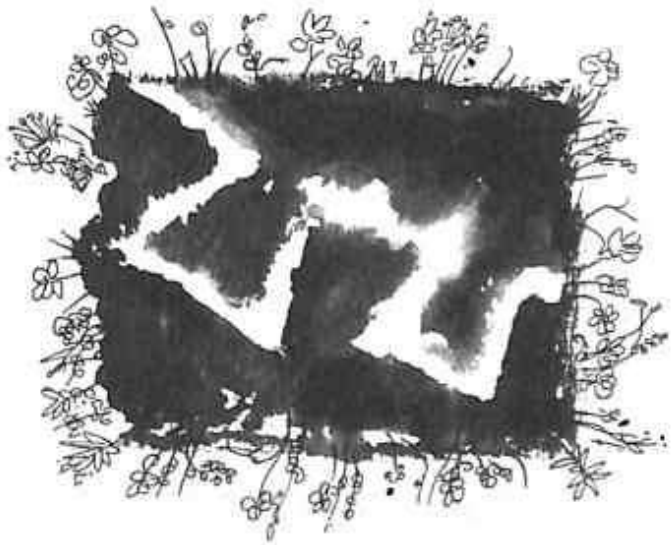
It became wrinkled like a balloon with the air out and flew up with difficultly, coughing from the smoke.

Now all the houses around were blazing. Roofs further off were smoking and smouldering.

The gunsmiths and carpenters drove the guards away from the well. But it was no easy matter to get at the water, because the well was filled with stones.

People flocked to the burning houses from all sides. They brought water. Their last precious drops. Some in a bucket, some in a jug, some in a tiny cup.

But how can you save a burning town with a cup of water?



Chapter 27

OLD GRANDMA THUNDERCLOUD'S LIGHTNING

"Ha, ha, ha!" Barbatoots bellowed suddenly. "Look at All-Ears! He's going to crawl under the carriage."

Everyone looked at All-Ears.

All-Ears was leaning against the carriage and sinking to the ground. He squatted on his haunches and huddled with his face between his two raised knees.

He was looking up in horror, fury and amazement.

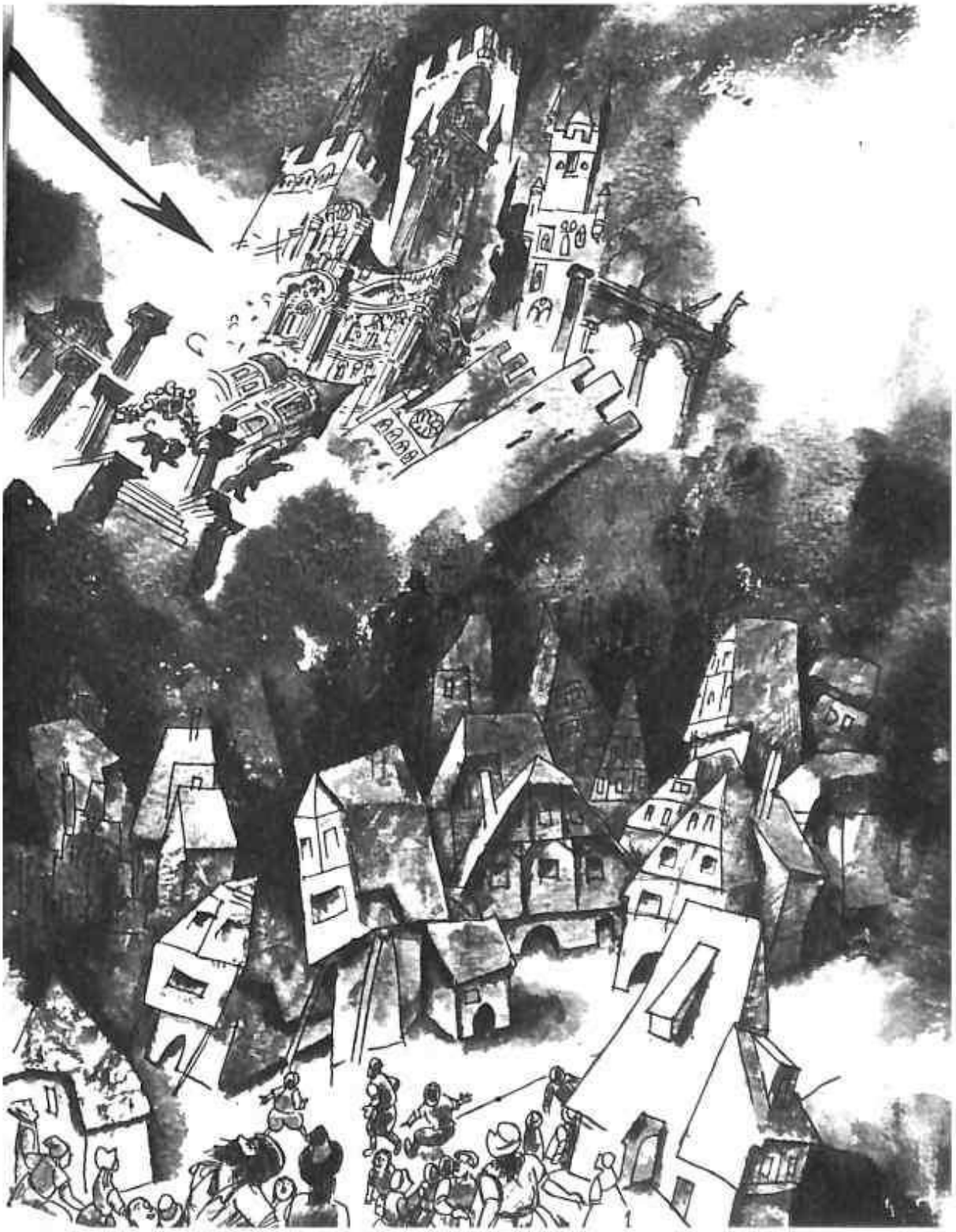
Only then did the people see that the sky above their heads had darkened. As if night had fallen suddenly.

A dark heavy cloud was floating over the town, trailing its mauve rags over the roofs of the houses.

Something inside it was rumbling ominously, as if it were dragging along boxes full of brass pots and shaking and rattling them.

"Stop it! Cease it! Forbid it!" All-Ears shouted loudly. And although he was shouting for the first time in his life, no one heard him.

"A drop!" a child's voice rang out suddenly. "Mummy, a drop fell on my nose from the sky!"



Then it was as if someone had tipped up a huge barrel as big as the sky. Streams of water gushed down noisily onto the burning town.

"You naughty Cloud! Never give your old grandmother a moment's peace!" Came a rumbling, thundering voice from above.

There was a sudden flash of lightning. It stopped for a moment in the sky, like a silver tree, and illumined everything with a quivering light.

The lightning struck the pointed roof of the palace. And in its wake a huge grey hand threw a handful of fire-balls into the palace window.

The people in the square shouted and grabbed one another's arms for support.

The main tower of the palace shook, tilted and collapsed. The ground rumbled. Then they saw a bright jet of water gush out of the ruins and leap up to the thundercloud. It was the Great Spring flying into the sky.

The rumbling became mixed with thunder and chuckling. Then the rain beat down with renewed force.

The water quelled the tongues of flame. The fire hissed, writhed, twisted and turned, and tried to hide in the clusters of houses. But the water sought it out and chased it off the roofs and wet beams until there was not a single red ember left.

Then the rain came down even more gaily.

People rushed out of their houses. They stretched up their hands and the water ran down their arms to their shoulders.

Grey-haired old men came out of doors. They remembered their childhood, and the rain washed the tears from their cheeks.

The children hopped over the puddles, raising fountains of spray. It was as if the rain were coming from above and below at the same time.

The wet pigeons circled over the houses, flapping their wings and driving away the smoke.

Then everyone noticed that Head Counsellor All-Ears, the Captain of the King's Guards, the Head Gaoler, and the soldiers were not in the square anymore.

It was as if the downpour had washed these wicked people away, like rain clears rubbish and dirt from the streets.

And no one ever saw them again. They had obviously been so frightened by the rain that they had run away to some distant land, never daring to return.

The rain gave the little chimney sweep a good wash, too. It turned out that his hair and eyebrows were as fair as could be, even wet they were flaxen.

"Oh, you, little wretch!" Barbatoots turned on Raggity. "You've scorched your dress! That's what you wanted, isn't it? Now we'll have to buy you a new one."

But Raggity only hugged Barbatoots hard and kissed her sooty face.

"Serves you right! Serves you right!" came a hollow voice, rumbling over the ground.

Through the falling rain they could see old Grandma Thundercloud pulling the poor Cloud along by the ear.

She was tugging him this way and that.

"Do you promise not to disobey your old Grandma again? And not to go flying off where you shouldn't? And then sending pigeons for me when you need me? 'Come and help me, Granny!' Eh?"

The Cloud hopped about on one foot, howling miserably.

"Let him go! Let him go at once!" shouted Barbatoots, jumping up and down with all her might and shaking her fist at the sky. "You should all be ashamed of yourselves! You abandoned us, left us alone! He

was the only one who helped us. So stop pulling his ears."

Barbatoots' words must have made an impression on old Grandma Thundercloud because, muttering and swirling angrily, she let the Cloud go.

Rubbing its ear, which was now bigger then a cart wheel, the Cloud rushed over to Raggity.

"What a remarkable face your esteemed grandmother has!" Vermilion said rapturously to the Cloud. "If only she would consent to sit for me... How delighted I should be to paint her portrait!"

In the meantime the crowd had gathered round our friends.

They were lifted up onto people's shoulders and carried off.

Barbatoots kicked as hard as she could and banged her fists on a few heads. But the old gunsmith whispered to her:

"Steady on, dear Barbatoots! None of that. Have you forgotten that I asked for your hand fifty years ago? And when you refused me, I never married."

Barbatoots cuffed him on the back of the neck, but stopped banging heads.

Five gunsmiths, three weavers, seven bakers and the umbrella maker were carefully carrying the weightless Cloud.

A beefy blacksmith had Sooty on one shoulder and Raggity on the other.

Only Rositta the Toad asked to be left in a puddle and allowed to recover a bit and get her breath back.

"I should like to have a little rest from all this turmoil and reflect upon eternity..." she announced. "Upon how spawn becomes a tadpole and the tadpole turns into a frog and everything follows its course. Then I will hop along and join in your celebrations."

The rain went on and on. Everyone was soaked to the skin, but no one wanted it to stop.

On the Square of the Solitary Cow the One-And-Only Beggar danced in the rain, and in the Great Clockmaker's workshop all his clever clocks chimed with joy.

The crowd stopped on the old bridge.

People were leaning over the rails and looking down.

Along the dry river bed, between the bare dusty stones, ran a timid muddy trickle of water.

But the people looked at it in awe.

Then the water rose. Soon it was gurgling between the stones and swirling round the posts of the bridge.

"It's my water! Mine!" shouted Uncle Glug. His eyes were empty and lifeless. He tried to catch the water in his hands, but it slipped between his fingers. The water had now risen right up to his chest.

"All mine!... I won't let anyone have a single drop, not a single drop, without paying!" he gabbled.

"He's gone mad from greed and spite," the people said.

And the women shooed the boys away and forbade them to tease a madman.

At last everyone arrived at the palace square. The Gardens gates were wide open.

Girls were picking basketful of flowers. They wove garlands and threw them into the river.

"No, I can't sit in the same place any longer! I've never been so tired in all my life..." grumbled old Grandma Thundercloud, flying out of the window of Vermilion the Artist's studio.

But Vermilion had already finished the portrait.

He was happy. True he was sitting up to his waist in water. All the plaster on the walls and ceiling had got soaked and peeled off. But the portrait was an excellent likeness. Old Grandma Thundercloud looked most lifelike in it.

This portrait is now hanging in the town museum.

"Well, time to say goodbye!" rumbled old Grandma Thundercloud, appearing over the square.

"Don't go!" shouted Raggity, hugging the Cloud.

"Oh, these farewells!" Old Grandma Thundercloud tugged the Cloud by the arm and pulled him up into the air. "Now they'll both start snivelling and send down a shower!"

"Farewell, Raggity!" shouted the Cloud, trying to pull his hand out of his Grandma's large mauve paw. The Cloud's arm grew longer and longer, but old Grandma Thundercloud took him away with her all the same.

Tears were pouring from the Cloud's eyes.

"I'll follow you!" shouted Raggity, weeping.

But Barbatoots held her firmly by the hand.

"Let me go, let me go!" Raggity tried to break loose.

"Little girls don't run around after clouds," Barbatoots said sadly. "It's not done."

"When will you come again?" shouted Raggity.

"Clouds will come to your country often now!" the Cloud replied from afar.

"But you? Will you come?" shouted Raggity at the top of her voice.

"Yes, I'll come... I'll come..." the wind wafted the words to her.

"I'll wait for you..." Raggity whispered.

Barbatoots hugged Raggity so hard, that Raggity's shoulder blades cracked.

The rain had stopped. Only heavy drops thudded down from the roofs. Each drop seemed to utter a short, strange, but very happy word as it fell.

Old Grandma Thundercloud turned in flight. She rummaged in the baggy folds of her grey cloak and found a striped and gleaming scarf, which she shook out and threw into the air.

A shining rainbow arched over the town.